

From Sibiriyakov's French repertoire there are three selections - from *Lakmé*, *Faust* and *La Juive* - demonstrating a good understanding of the style, exploiting his excellent vocal line, in fact showing the voice in all its glory. Sibiriyakov's initial training with Rossi in Milan must have left the strong impressions for he does not disappoint in his singing of Italian arias. Mephistophelean indeed is the tone he musters in the famous '**Ave Signor**' from Boito's *Mefistofele*, and in '**Pro Pecatis**' from Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, (the only item sung other than in Russian), he evinces an impressive nobility of utterance. '**In felice**' from Verdi's *Ernani* combines gravitas with a perfect legato - note the fluent florid descending cadenza at the end - whilst in Colline's '**Farwell to his coat**' from the last act of Puccini's *La Bohème*, Sibiriyakov does sound genuinely sad and self-sacrificing.

In the selections from Wagner's *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre* it is the unforced volume of voice rising effortlessly above the orchestra that impresses, as do the majestic low F's in the Lohengrin aria. Massenet's **Elegie** gets a respectable reading, albeit a little fast for modern taste, but the simple melodic Russian songs by Gaiser, Romberg and Glazanov (especially the **Tobolsk Convict song**) seem to convey a more genuine emotion, as does his suitably dramatic performance of **Field Marshall Death** from Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*.

Lev Sibiriyakov may have stood in the shadow of his great contemporary, Fedor Chaliapin, for the greater part of a century, but this compilation reveals him as one of the greatest operatic voices ever to have been recorded.

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* *The Levik Memoirs: An Opera Singer's Notes.*

Translated by Edward Morgan. Published by Symposium Records. ISBN 0 9524361 1 6

Nimbus Records

LEV SIBIRYAKOV



PRIMA VOCE

LEV SIBIRYAKOV 1869-1942

- | | | |
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| 1 | PRINCE IGOR , Borodin - Galitsky's Song – I can't conceal that I dislike boredom
Rec: 9 February 1909 Matrix: 6532o Gramophone Cat: 1-75154 | 2.20 |
| 2 | A LIFE FOR THE TSAR , Glinka - They guess the truth ... my dawn will come
Rec: 1908 Matrix: 7935l Gramophone Cat: 3-22884 | 3.12 |
| 3 | THE DEMON , Rubinstein - A cursed World
Rec: 6 May 1912 Matrix: 165166 Gramophone Cat: 4-22368 | 2.58 |
| 4 | THE DEMON , Rubinstein - I am he whom you called
Rec: 6 May 1912 Matrix: 165176 Gramophone Cat: 4-22369 | 3.25 |
| 5 | RUSALKA , Dargomizhsky - Duet (Miller and Prince)
Rec: 7 & 16 October 1912 Matrix: 2673c/2662c Gramophone Cat: 024070/71
with Alexandr Alexandrovich | 8.07 |
| 6 | BORIS GODUNOV , Mussorgsky - Pimen's Monologue
Rec: 28 October 1913 Matrix: 2881?c Gramophone Cat: 022327 | 4.49 |
| 7 | LAKMÉ , Delibes - Lakmé, ton doux regard
Rec: 1907 Matrix: N/A Parlaphone Cat: B 45865 | 3.06 |
| 8 | FAUST , Gounod - Le veau d'or
Rec: 1909 Matrix: 6779r Gramophone Cat: 4-22017 | 2.16 |
| 9 | LA JUIVE , Halévy - Si la rigueur et la vengeance
Rec: 20 September 1910 Matrix: 2030c Gramophone Cat: 022173 | 3.52 |
| 10 | MEFISTOFELE , Boito - Ave Signor
Rec: November 1909 Matrix: 427s Gramophone Cat: 022149 | 3.25 |
| 11 | STABAT MATER , Rossini - Pro Peccatis
Rec: 7 November 1913 Matrix: 2898c Gramophone Cat: 022332 | 4.19 |
| 12 | ERNANI , Verdi - In felice
Rec: 20 September 1910 Matrix: 2031c Gramophone Cat: 022172 | 3.29 |

Lev Sibiriyakov is surely the first in a line of celebrity basses - primarily of Jewish origin, initially from Eastern Europe, or children of emigrants - who include Alexander Kipnis, Mark Reizen, Theodore Lattermann, Emmanuel List, Hermann Schey, Dészo Ernster, Alfred Kaufmann, Edward Lankow (Rosenberg) Raphael Arié, and Martin Lawrence.

Prima Voce has taken ten years to assemble a large number of Sibiriyakov's recordings, which are extremely difficult to find in their original 78 rpm format. They amply demonstrate the range and sonority of Sibiriyakov's voice across a broad spectrum of the repertory with which he was most closely associated. Unlike his distinguished colleague Feodor Chaliapin, who was undoubtedly one of the greatest singers and performers to have ever appeared on the operatic stage, Sibiriyakov does not create idiosyncratic or mannered interpretations. He relies instead on his technique and voice alone to convey the composer's musical and dramatic intentions.

The first six items are taken from Sibiriyakov's Russian repertoire, and that special quality we expect from Eastern European basses is much in evidence; a dark but malleable sound that is sonorous, not hollow and, in Sibiriyakov's case, never wooden. In Galitsky's song '**hating a dreary life**' from Borodin's *Prince Igor*, is sung with piano only, but the voice is so strong and the rhythmic presentation so lively that one seems not to miss the orchestra. In Ivan Susanin's great monologue '**They guess the truth**' from Glinka's *A life for the Tsar* the resignation of being discovered, and no doubt facing certain death by the Polish troops he has lead astray from their objective, is well delineated. Sibiriyakov's voluminous and unbelievably free upper register is awesome in the excerpts from Rubinstein's *Demon*, all the more remarkable when one considers that this role was more often than not sung by a dramatic baritone. In the long scene between the Miller and the Prince from Dargomizhsky's *Rusalka* Sibiriyakov is ably supported by Alexander Alexandrovich (a fine tenor, not to be confused with the lyric tenor Mikail Alexandrovich of a later generation). Sibiriyakov finds an opportunity for fine characterisation in the lengthy monologue at the beginning of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, portraying the old monk, Pimen, truly weary of the burden of writing Russia's history.

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“an enormous wave of soft sound which was phenomenally powerful, where the top and bottom notes sounded equally rich and strong and the middle was wonderfully strong- a voice in which the forte and piano were equally full and supported unshakably firm on a column of air, marvellously supported on the breath....it was difficult to be indifferent to such a marvellous voice, so well placed and with such perfect intonation and cantilena”.

Levik goes on to compares Sibiryakov’s artistic performance unfavourably with other famous basses in Russia at that time, but then ruefully admits to contradicting himself by declaring that:

“as Don Basilio (Barbiere) or King René (Iolanta) Marcel (Les Huguenots) or even in Wotan’s lengthy monologues (Walküre) the quality of the beautifully trained and cultivated sound brought to Sibiryakov’s singing an imagination and a poetry which could be just as persuasive as the intelligent and calculated singing of an artist with an average voice”

Throughout his memoirs Levik emphasises that Sibiryakov was always worth hearing, allowing that his shortcomings as an actor were amply compensated by the sound of his voice alone. Levik says that Sibiryakov was able to produce tone that, without forcing, easily penetrated the densest web of instrumental sound, even Wagner’s. He states categorically that Sibiryakov’s singing was based on ‘Bel Canto’ principals, and that in this respect he was the equal of the very best Italian singers: including Mattia Battistini who was then (as now), held to be the epitome of that style of singing.

During the 1917 Revolution Sibiryakov moved to Antwerp where he settled and became active as a teacher and recitalist. In 1932, at the age of 63 he was asked to sing at Monte Carlo, making his debut there on 10th March 1932 as Baldassare in *La Favorita* with Giacomo Lauri-Volpi as Fernando and Mlle. Todorova as Leonora. He appeared again on 19th March inaugurating a run of performances of *Aida* singing Ramfis, again with Lauri Volpi (Radames), Clara Jacobo(Aida), Todorova (Amneris) and Arthur Endrèze (Amonasro). He continued to give guest performances in Belgium and France; he gave his final stage appearance in 1938 as Pimen in *Boris Godounov*, but continued to teach until his death in Antwerp in October 1942.

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13	LA BOHÈME , Puccini - Vecchia zimarra	2.15
	Rec: 19 September 1910 Matrix: 14805b Gramophone Cat: 4-22210	
14	LOHENGRIN , Wagner - Mein Herr und Gott	3.41
	Rec: 20 September 1910 Matrix: 2033c Gramophone Cat: 022175	
15	DIE WALKÜRE , Wagner – Wotan’s Abchied	4.25
	Rec: 20 September 1910 Matrix: 2032c Gramophone Cat: 022174	
16	Massenet - Elégie	2.50
	Rec: 9 February 1909 Matrix: 6535o Favorite Cat: 1-75157	
17	Gaiser - The Execution	4.15
	Rec: 25 September 1911 Matrix: 2440c Gramophone Cat: 022238	
18	Harteveld - Tobolsk Convict Song	3.26
	Rec: 29 September 1910 Matrix: 14872b Gramophone Cat: 4-22171	
19	Romberg - Black Clouds	3.46
	Rec: 22 December 1912 Matrix: 17160b Gramophone Cat: 4-22462	
20	Glazunov - Song of Bacchus	3.32
	Rec: 1 October 1912 Matrix: 16684b Gramophone Cat: 4-22419	
21	Mussorgsky - Songs & Dances of Death: IV Field Marshall Death	5.01
	Rec: 12 September 1913 Matrix: 2904c Gramophone Cat: 022328	

Total playing time

78.33

All records courtesy of The Director and Staff of St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music. Photograph of Sibiryakov taken circa 1910 by Karl Fischer photographer to the Imperial Theatres, by kind permission of Dr Richard Copeman. With thanks also to Bill Breslin for his kind assistance.

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LEV SIBIRYAKOV (1869-1942)

Since the advent of sound recordings at the end of the 19th Century devotees of Vocal-Art have been fascinated by the voices of the great singers who were primarily active in the opera houses of Imperial Russia. Since comparatively few of these legendary singers made careers in the West, most could only be judged by their recordings - which were always very hard to find. This rarity perforce lent them an air of mystery. It also encouraged comparisons with *I Grandi Nomi*; those with whom the cognoscenti and opera lovers in Western Europe and the Americas were more familiar.

Many fine Russian singers learnt their vocal technique and singing style from Italian and French masters and performances in Imperial Russia were dominated by the standard Italian, French and German repertory. In addition guest artists – always the most distinguished singers from Western Europe - performed the popular repertoire repeatedly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It is no surprise that the development of a uniquely Russian school was inhibited for so long. With a few exceptions, scant attention was given to the Russian operas then being composed. Lev Sibiryakov, however, was one of a small handful of Russian singers who appeared abroad, in the standard repertoire; he also promoted operas written by late 19th century Russian composers, and he recorded music that was to become a core element of an emerging Russian musical heritage.

Lev Sibiryakov was born in 1869 in St. Petersburg and first sang in a synagogue choir as a boy. His voice developed well (as did his physique - he was six-foot-six tall) and he was sent to Italy, where, like the famous Russian dramatic tenor Ivan Yershov (1867-1943), he studied with the noted teacher Rossi, in Milan. Sibiryakov made some appearances in Italy, but, on returning to Russia he made swift progress through various provincial opera houses, including Tiflis, Kharkov, Kiev and Baku, and eventually gained a contract to sing at the Marinsky (now Kirov) opera. His debut there was in 1895, singing the popular German and Italian repertory and some Russian works.

In 1910 Sibiryakov was invited to take part in a season in Boston under the direction of

Henry Russell. Accompanied by his wife and son he arrived in the US prepared to perform in Russian, notwithstanding that all his colleagues would be singing in the original languages of each opera, and made his American debut on 7th November. He sang the title role of *Mefistofele* in Boito's Opera, alongside Robert Lasselle (Faust), Frances Alda (Margherita) and Carmen Melis (Elena). On 14th November he sang Méphistophèlès in Gounod's *Faust* with Hermann Jadlowker as the eponymous hero, Alice Nielsen (Margurite) and George Baklanoff (Valentine). On 19th November, at a matinee, he appeared as Don Basilio in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* with Lydia Lipkowska (Rosina) and Florencio Constantino (Almaviva). In all he sang eight times, and while impressing the critics very much with his voice, did not gain any particular plaudits for his artistic or histrionic ability. Unfortunately a rumour appeared in the Boston *Transcript* that he had somehow upset the Manager's wife by making an improper suggestion to her, (he made a pass!) and Sibiryakov was obliged to make a sudden withdrawal. Spicy gossip about glamorous opera singers was a matter of great interest to the press in those days, rather as it is for the leading pop-singers of to-day.

In the Covent Garden 'Royal Opera Season' of 1911 Sibiryakov appeared as Marcel in *Les Huguenots* with Destinn, Tetrazzini, Wilna, Darmel, Sammarco, Huberdeau and Campanini. He performed in Berlin in 1912 after which he returned to Russia to become a premier artist at the Marinsky. There he enjoyed an important career, being the acknowledged possessor of one of the finest bass voices in the world: no mean accolade in a country that could boast some of the greatest basses ever heard.

Sibiryakov's voice was well described by Sergei Levik, (a professional baritone who became a distinguished commentator on Russian productions, performances, singers and singing technique). He writes in his memoirs* that when he first heard Sibiryakov in Kiev he had dismissed him as an artist. He saw him again at the Marinsky as Don Basilio in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and had the same initial reaction; being impressed with neither his artistry nor diction, and even noting that he had a slight lisp. Nevertheless, after the audience on this occasion demanded a third encore of the 'Calumny' aria Levik paid closer attention to the voice and realised that what he was hearing was:

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