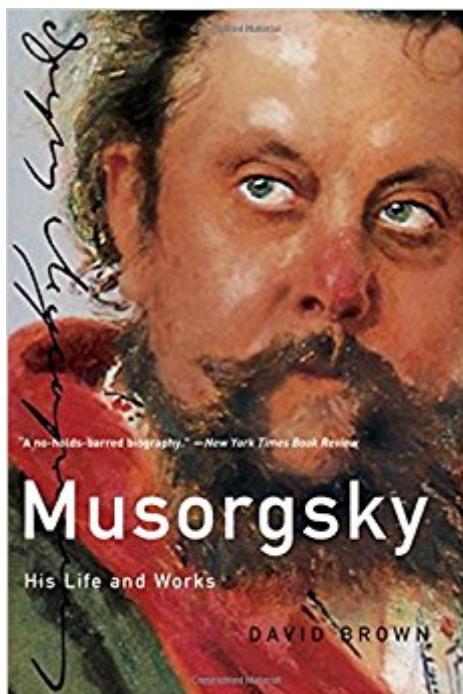


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# **Musorgsky: His Life And Works (Master Musicians Series)**



## Synopsis

Modest Musorgsky was one of the towering figures of nineteenth-century Russian music. Now, in this new volume in the Master Musicians series, David Brown gives us the first life-and-works study of Musorgsky to appear in English for over a half century. Indeed, this is the largest such study of Musorgsky to have appeared outside Russia. Brown shows how Musorgsky, though essentially an amateur with no systematic training in composition, emerged in his first opera, *Boris Godunov*, as a supreme musical dramatist. Indeed, in this opera, and in certain of his piano pieces in *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Musorgsky produced some of the most startlingly novel music of the whole nineteenth century. He was also one of the most original of all song composers, with a prodigious gift for uncovering the emotional content of a text. As Brown illuminates Musorgsky's work, he also paints a detailed portrait of the composer's life. He describes how, unlike the systematic and disciplined Tchaikovsky, Musorgsky was a fitful composer. When the inspiration was upon him, he could apply himself with superhuman intensity, as he did when composing the initial version of *Boris Godunov*. Sadly, Musorgsky deteriorated in his final years, suffering periods of inner turmoil, when his alcoholism would be out of control. Finally, unemployed and all but destitute, he died at age forty-two. His failure to complete his two remaining operas, *Khovanshchina* and *Sorochintsy Fair*, Brown concludes, is one of music's greatest tragedies. Written by one of the leading authorities on nineteenth-century Russian composers, Musorgsky is the finest available biography of this giant of Russian music.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Brown, author of the standard biography of Tchaikovsky and professor emeritus of musicology at the University of Southampton, brings his many years of Russian music writing to this biography of Russian composer Musorgsky. Most famous for his opera *Boris Godunov* and his orchestral piece *St. John's Night on the Bare Mountain* (made popular as the climax of Disney's *Fantasia*), Musorgsky was a member of a group of nationalist composers often called "the Mighty Handful," whose members included Tchaikovsky. Brown devotes major chapters of his book to the composition and music of Musorgsky's operas, such as the various versions of *Boris* as well as the unfinished *Khovanshchina* and *Sorochintsky Fair*, which were worked on by other composers after his death. Brown's deep interest lies in the music rather than the man, for he pays little interest to Musorgsky's medical problems, especially the "dementia" and depressions of his early years, which Brown considers to be the results of the composer's alcoholism, a disease that killed him at the age of 42. And while Brown does not have the rhetorical panache of Richard Taruskin (Musorgsky), he refrains from musicological jargon or overly technical musical analyses, bringing together a solid biography of the composer. 3 line illustrations and 18 halftones not seen by PW. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The latest addition to Oxford's "Master Musicians" series, this is actually an update of a 1946 volume on Mussorgsky from Oxford. Musicologist Brown (Mikhail Glinka; Tchaikovsky) clearly knows late 19th-century Russian music and society and accurately portrays his subject as an amateur with no conservatory training in composition who nonetheless became one of the most revered of the group of Russian nationalist composers known as "The Five." His early death at age 42, brought on by alcohol poisoning, was a tragedy of immeasurable proportions, as he left incomplete two operas, *Khovanshchina* and *Sorochintsy Fair*. The book is well organized: the author seamlessly weaves perceptive but not overly arcane musical analysis with rich biographical detail. Three chapters are devoted to a detailed discussion of Mussorgsky's operatic masterpiece, *Boris Godunov*, but several other important works, such as *Night on Bald Mountain* (here referred to by its British title, *St. John's Night on Bare Mountain*) and *Songs and Dances of Death*, are given less than their due. The bibliography, which contains more than a dozen Russian-language sources, is reasonably thorough and up-to-date, and it includes a good deal of the writing on Mussorgsky by the brilliant and controversial American musicologist Richard Taruskin. Overall, this is an

indispensable addition to the scanty material in English on this great Russian composer. Highly recommended for all collections. Larry Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, PA Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

An updated book - in English - on one of the most original composers who ever lived has been a long-time hope for many a Mussorgski fan. Although there are several, if not dozens, of published essays and articles in various periodicals, this marks the first in-depth biography (in English and in book form) in decades. But for all of its positive attributes (and there are many) I found the book ultimately a major disappointment. First of all, although the title indicates a study of both his life and his work, the author concentrates on the latter - with great acumen (sometimes too great, in my opinion) but leaves the former more than a bit murky (especially by comparison with his dazzling analyses of Mussorgski's oeuvre). Of course, this is partly attributable to the rather scanty information that has been bequeathed to us, even with the fairly recent disclosure of previous unpublished material relating to his life. But (at least for me) an author must go beyond the meagre facts and probe deeper, especially into a life so obviously troubled and - by the end - so piteously wretched. Setting aside for a moment the on-going debate of the born vs. nurture (i.e. outward circumstances) tendencies towards alcoholism, it seems troubling that the author does not wish to even offer possible causes for the degeneration and ultimate destruction (thru this disease) of one of the most important personalities in musical history. This is unfortunate. For although I applaud the author in his restraint in offering anything like "armchair psychology", the very fact that for years Mussorgski remained for the most part sober, (notwithstanding even regular, if fairly infrequent bouts of intoxication) begs the question: why did a person drink himself to death by the time he was only 42 years old? This the author never even brings up, let alone probes into the possible reasons. For me this is unacceptable in a work of this stature. There are certainly clues. Mr. Brown writes early on that the composer's sexuality has never been definitively determined. That may surely be the case but shouldn't any inquiring mind want to go deeper into the reasons why Mussorgski had no (apparently) sexual relations with any women and yet at the same time be thrown into the deepest despair when his roommate and close friend left him to (as it turned out) become married to a 15 year old girl? This, for me anyway, strongly indicates a homosexual leaning, if not orientation, even if never consummated or even understood (and accepted) by the individual. And there are other clues which Mr. Brown mentions about Mussorgski's close relationships with men that cry out for some, if not explanation, at least greater exposition of possible reasons. In short, Mr. Brown is faced with a personality that he chooses largely to ignore in its most important aspects: the inner person. It has

long been discussed among psychologists and psychiatrists that alcoholism, notwithstanding its possibility as an innate tendency, is often the result of sexual unsatisfaction, especially in men. I am not saying this is the root of Mussorgski's drinking problems, but the fact that no real reason is proposed, let alone discussed in detail, is for me one of the great faults of this volume. But I have further gripes, if less onerous. The author goes into great detail on Mussorgski's concert tour (toward the end of his life) with the contralto Darya Leonova in which he not only gives a nearly complete blow-by-blow account of every performance's program, but is careful to include remarks (mainly from letters) on the composer's fast-deteriorating condition. Yet for me the most disturbing question is this: why did not this obviously magnificent pianist perform at least some excerpts from his own (and still-unpublished) "Pictures at an Exposition" instead of the small and not-nearly-so-significant pieces that he offered to an audience that virtually ate up his virtuosity at the keyboard? It certainly wasn't because "Pictures" was written for a specific commission (such as Chopin's "Fantasie Impromptu" which proscribed at least public performances) or for a specific pianist. Nor because he was too inebriated to play as was clearly not the case. This to me is a mystery not even hinted at but certainly deserves some elucidation. All of this begs for a deeper look into a personality whose outward bravado (and here Mr. Brown skirts the issue entirely of Mussorgski's well-known arrogance and bristling at any criticism) hides so deep an abyss of doubts and insecurities that no wonder such a sensitive person drank himself to death. Yet the author never comes even close to discussing any of these issues (nor of the reasons behind the sudden dismissal from his long-held civil-service job in the penultimate year of his life). As far as the musical issues, I am also a bit disappointed, if only because there is hardly any criticism of any of Mussorgski's very real faults as a composer, as if being a towering genius protects even the most obvious shortcomings as off-limits. Again this is unfortunate. No one loves Mussorgski more than I but as a composer he was far from perfect and I think any appraisal of his work, however laudatory, must also include serious and well intended criticism. For all of Mussorgski's blusterings against so-called "traditional" or "Western" music, I think this was again a self-defense against personal insecurities I believe all artists suffer from. Could he have written a string quartet, or a well-constructed tone-poem, let alone an entire symphony? I think not; and just because this was not "his thing" plus the fact that he also wrote one of the greatest operas ever written (and one of the greatest of all piano works and dozens of first-rate songs), does this (let's face it) tiny output entitle him to a place beside others in the olympian pantheon? I'm glad I don't have to answer this question but I think Mr. Brown is kidding himself if thinks ignoring some very real deficiencies in Mussorgski's training or even in his greatest works can simply be left unsaid and thus will fade

away. This he never discusses and remains for me the book's second major defect. I'm glad I have the book and I recommend it, with reservation, to others but I wish the author (and/or editor) had been a little bit more demanding on the finished product.

The seller delivered the book very quickly and the price was good. Great transaction there. The book itself is wonderful, providing all the detail you want about Musorgsky and his music, but not at all tedious. My favorite single musical work is Musorgsky's "Boris Godunov"-- I learned Russian specifically in order to be able to listen to "Boris" without having to refer to someone's translation of the libretto-- and I am always on the lookout for new insights into Musorgsky's thought and sensibilities, and this book delivers.

David Brown is the retired Professor of Musicology at the University of Southampton, and author of *Mikhail Glinka: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Da Capo Press music reprint series) and *Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music*. He records, "It is a notorious fact that the addiction to alcohol that was finally to destroy Musorgsky had its beginning in the four years he spent at the Schools for Guards' Cadets... they point implacably to a situation in which any sensitive boy would have had phases of unutterable misery from which alcohol would have provided the swiftest and most ready means of temporary escape..." (Pg. 5) Later, his friend Borodin noted, "Almost daily he sits in the Maly Yaroslavets restaurant... and gets drunk, sometimes till he's insensible." (Pg. 225) He observes, "Musorgsky's sexuality has long been a subject for speculation---and such, in the absence of much hard evidence, it is likely to remain." (Pg. 24) He notes, "yet Boris [Gudunov], unquestionably Musorgsky's greatest work, also provided him with his greatest public triumph. It was also the watershed in his life." (Pg. 228) Sadly, about 'Pictures at an Exhibition,' "There is no record of it ever receiving public performance during Musorgsky's lifetime." (Pg. 231) In his final illness, alcohol (which had been forbidden to him, but which he obtained by bribing an orderly at the Hospital) caused his final collapse; "Now that the end was imminent, it was decided he must settle all his affairs, and he assigned all his royalty and publishing rights, both present and future, to Filippov, assessing them at 2000 roubles. In all other regards, Musorgsky died a pauper." (Pg. 358) This is an excellent book about a composer who is often shrouded in mystery.

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