HEN my editor asked me, "What do you know about opera?" I found myself sifting through the collected troves of unusable—usually unusable—information heaped in a writer’s mental junkyard, sorting through files overloaded with gems of the arcane, the curious, the exotic, the mind-bogglingly dumb, hunting for operatic lore.

What I unearthed was paltry: random dates; names of composers, productions, and singers; a few places (La Scala, the Met, Covent Garden). A few quixotic quotes (Al Capone’s “To me, grand opera is the berries” and some scenes from the Marx Brothers’ classic send-up of opera and the haut monde, coupled with New Yorker movie critic Pauline Kael’s sage assessment that “In A Night at the Opera, the Marx Brothers do to opera what it deserves to have done to it”). Also, a host of crude impressions, most starring a stereotypically sizable soprano—a dead ringer for Margaret Dumont—with trailing blond braids and cavernous breastplates bleating interminable intimations of imminent death, which never—alas!—seems to descend to silence as quickly as I’d like.

Aghast at the prospect of enduring such an ordeal, I thought how best to feign an incapacitating tone-deafness or a phobic dread of musical drama stemming from some unspeakable childhood trauma. I didn’t think it would play; when I responded to the question, it was with resignation and—I hoped—commendable professional fatalism: “Not too much. Why!!”

Little did I realize that soon I would know something about opera—and from the inside. What I would learn would have nothing to do with busty Vikings, happy-go-lucky gondoliers, or tubercular Bohemians. I was to cover the world premiere of Rasputin by Jay Reise, ’75 G, the associate professor of music at Penn who wrote both its score and libretto. It is Reise’s first opera, commissioned by Beverly Sills for the New York City Opera and sung for the first time in the company’s home at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts on September 17.

But before the glitter and glamour of the premiere—which will also be marked by
something cluver—I make two trips to Lincoln Center to see Raspunin come alive. To get to the first of the two rehearsals I am grudgingly permitted to attend—the New York City Opera publicists guard too well against intruders—I have to rise long before dawn, dash to Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station to catch an express train, and then stand and wait until it arrives. Two hours later, at the stage entrance of the building in Lincoln Center known as the New York State Theater, I pass a smiling guard, who instructs me in a Jamaican lift to follow the squares of black set into the tile floor until I come to the practice area, where I am to meet Jay Reise.

Down long corridors I descend—not much like Orpheus, I fear—passing a burly man guiding a floor-waxer. To my satisfaction, he sings as he toils, an aria that I can recognize as a modern composer’s, who tried to get rid of the past. “Those layers,” she says, referring to his tardiness when he arrives. Now 38 years old, he wears glasses with clip-on tinted lenses hearing conversations between the copyists. He is all the more amiable, with a puckish expression—much suggestive of humorist Garrison Keillor—then he begins to play. Keene, who is wearing a short-sleeved knit shirt, waves a pencil in his hand, indicating something to the pianist. He is content with that, either. “Certainly anybody listening to my music,” he says, “is going to be aware of the fact that I've heard it before.”

Reise’s music is usually accorded the catch-phrase “eclectic”; Reise himself employs it when talking about his work—especially about Raspunin—but he expresses some reservations about the term, wondering if he has overused it, or if it has come to carry derogatory connotations. His approach to composing, he says, “involves examining and cutting from the best sources. We’re all influenced, we all have a parentage, we all have roots, and I think that a lot of art esthetics that involved negating roots—I think of Webern and Schoenberg [two of the most influential modern composers], who tried to get rid of the whole 19th century—has become this obsessive quest for what has become, for lack of a better definition of the term, originality.” To him, that spells a serious problem, especially since, in his view, even the most erudite listeners (and, I suspect, critics) “wouldn’t know originality if it hit them over the head.”

Reise considers the term polyphonic to encompass his musical sphere, but he isn’t content with that, either. “Certainly anybody listening to my music,” he says, “is going to be aware of the fact that I've heard it before.” In Raspunin, he uses tonal music and atonal music, usually depending on the characters, and the opera includes strains of a Russian waltz, ragtime, and cabaret motifs. “It feels strongly that the intermingling of modern atonality with more traditional tonal music is not a style, merely a spectrum of compositional range, and that the task for today's writers of music is to melding the modern and the traditional with authority. “The problem historically is: do you do that convincingly?” he says, “and we all take our chances. I think it's not a convincing; I hope so. I try to.”

The music is, to my ears, very modern, brimming with dissonances and harmonic clashes, flinty and formal. So I’m surprised when, at measure 816, Keene asks the pianist, “Can you play that fox trot now?” A fox trot ensues, and the pianist is soon joined by the strings, the juxtaposition creating a tense, still-dissonant counterpoint. The piano is soon drowned out—in fact, it seems to sink right, surface, and sink again, almost like the proverbial “down for the third time.” The effect is eerie and unsettling.

When the passage concludes, the orchestra takes a break. A woman comes up to Reise. “Those layers?” she says, referring to the dense carpets of sound: “brilliant.” The orchestra pit empties; a violist delicately packs her instrument in its case and unwraps a package from which she removes two hard-boiled eggs.

During the break, I wander around, overhearing conversations between the growing number of people lounging around, trying to guess what they have to do with the opera: those who pace nervously, grind their hands on their diaphragms, and emit trills are dead giveaways. When the orchestra reconvenes, I hear more unusual instruments: a tenor saxophone wobbling in a swing-era mode, Chinese gongs add brassy flutters, and although I am unable to spot them, I am convinced I hear maracas. I have to remind myself that this strange, exotic, demanding music is but one part of something much vaster—the foundation for a drama, for singing and acting.

A little after noon, the singers are called up, and they sit on two benches at the forefront of the stage, which is concealed by the curtain. Most are in casual dress, jeans and knit shirts. They flip through the score while they wait for one of their number to join them, and soon, one of them, grown impatient, summons the shirker with a down-home cry of “Hennnnn-reeeeey!” (Tenor Henry Price, who plays Prince Felix Yusupov, Raspunin’s assassin.) A tall man with a puckish expression—much suggestive of humorist Garrison Keillor—then stands and, with a stylishly dressed woman, begins to sing. (They are bass-baritone John Cheek, who has the title role, and soprano Margaret Cusack, who plays Tsarina Alexander Romanov.)

The number and combinations of singers shift as different groupings practice different portions of the opera.

I know the generalities of Raspunin’s life and career: a rural monk, he attached himself to the ruling Romanov family by stanching the bleeding of Tsar Nicholas...
and Tsarina Alexandra's hemophilic son and heir, accruing tremendous power and influence. He was said to be an overwhelmingly forceful personality and to possess hypnotic powers. He was also said to be given to debauchery. Stories of his assassination—the huge doses of poison the monk quaffed without ill effect, of his withstanding pistol bullets and knife wounds, of his surviving being thrown from a window, and of his final demise, from all these, combined with drowning—are the stuff of gory movies and the nightmares of small boys.

Even having some familiarity with the facts, I find following the dramatic thread of the opera's version difficult, out of context (they are rehearsing Act II—I haven't yet seen Act I). I have not yet received a copy of the libretto, either, so I mostly pay attention to the singers' postures and stances. That becomes absorbing after the next break, when they practice Rasputin's death scene. The monk has been slipped a huge dose of poison but refuses to die; Cheek is campign it up, twitching his body and fluttering his hands after downing two glasses of cyanide-laced madeira. Endowed with a big, booming voice, Cheek continues to mug through the rehearsal.

It is evident, though, that he is not fooling around: his eyes dart from the score he holds to Keene and back again, and he appears to be looking for a physical stance that suits him, shifting his body restlessly, pulling his shoulders back as he sends his lines swimming out, leaping from the waist, swiveling and pivoting his torso, rocking on his heels. Occasionally, he gnaws at a knuckle. During the death scene, as Rasputin fades, Prince Yusupov taunts him: "I hate you, you bastard, hate you, hate you, hate you..." Cheek, playfully out of character, grimmaces, rolls his eyes at tenor Henry Price, and pantomimes a Bronx cheer.

At 1:15 p.m., Christopher Keene shushes the murmuring orchestra and raps his music stand twice. "That's it," he says, and the rehearsal is over.

The question I ask myself—and which I put to Jay Reise's colleagues, collaborators on Rasputin, and the composer himself—is a simple one: what motivates an American living in the 1980s to write an opera? Curiously enough, while the replies I get vary a little in the details, they all dance around the same word—temperament.

When I speak to Dr. George Crumb, the prolific and revered modern composer and professor of music at Penn who taught Jay Reise when Reise was a graduate student, he (like the others) says that undertaking an opera is "a matter of temperament." When I ask him if he's ever been so inclined, he lowers his head and peers at me from over his glasses for a moment. Suffering from a virus he brought back from a trip to Rio de Janeiro the week before and coughing violently throughout our interview, he says laconically, "No, that's a bug I've never been bitten by."

Why an opera? continues to resound in my mind, and when I ask Richard Wernick, another professor of music at Penn who is also a distinguished composer and also a former teacher of Reise's, he resorts to an anecdote. Aaron Copland, he says, had visited the University in 1980 and given a series of seminars to music students. In the course of one of those seminars, Wernick recalls, "One of the students asked the question almost exactly the way you've asked it: Why would anybody write an opera in the 20th century?" Copland, he says, met the query with a morsel of advice. "Don't do it;" the venerable composer had said: "Don't start—just stay clear of it!"

I can only assume Reise missed that talk.

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**Rasputin** is a very modern work in its perspective and conception—and delivers some unopercatic shocks along the way.

When I ask Reise his reasons for making the foray into the operatic, he offers some background before uttering the buzzword temperament. (It is two weeks before Rasputin makes its debut, and Reise is feverishly making cuts, revisions, and additions at night and spending his days in conference and rehearsal at Lincoln Center.) Why did he tackle an opera? "Well, because it's a very satisfying musical experience," he states simply: "It combines a literary experience with musical and theatrical ones. Not everybody is cut out to do it: it's an awful lot of work, and if you're not terribly interested in theater and drama and are more interested in music for its own sake, exclusively..." he trails off. "Some very great composers never wrote operas," he says, "like Liszt and Schubert." He pauses and, a moment later, corrects himself: "No, that's not true, Schubert wrote several—but they're so forgotten that I forgot I wrote them."

I ask if, this far along, he thinks he is cut out for opera. "Basically, you give it a shot," he replies: "You have to have the temperament to want to do it to start out with. My guess is that someone like Mahler—who never wrote an opera—never felt the true urge to do so, or never had the urge at the right time and place."

The events that propelled him into opera, he explains, allowed him to sidestep the tremendous obstacles that have deterred other composers—the investment of time and creative energy in a complicated and enormously costly project that might never be produced. "I'm particularly fortunate," he avows, "because the City Opera commissioned it and wanted to perform it—that's an awful lot to start with."

Rasputin's genesis came about almost off-handedly. I learn, Conductor Christopher Keene, then music director of the City Opera, has been an advocate of Reise's music, and his friend, for years, conducting more of it than anyone else. Keene introduced Beverly Sills to Reise's music, and Reise proposed Rasputin, which he was then—in 1985—beginning to formulate. Sills made a formal commission—her last, it turns out, as general director of the company. She hands control to Keene next season.

In describing the opera's gestation, Reise accords credit for the idea to George Crumb: "George and I play a lot of four-handed, two-piano music—we bang our way through Rachmaninoff and have a good time—and we were talking about opera. I said that I wanted to write one, and he said, 'You know, nobody's ever written on Rasputin—which is unbelievable, because it's such an operatic topic.'"

Reise began to saturate himself in early 20th-century Russian history—he was already an expert on and an admirer of the music stand twice. "That's it," he says, and the rehearsal is over.

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Reise began to saturate himself in early 20th-century Russian history—he was already an expert on and an admirer of the music of that era and its largely out-of-fashion composers, like F. E. Busoni, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Alexander Scriabin—in what would become, in his estimation, "an obsession." A week later, he says, he approached Crumb again. "Are you sure you don't want to use any of this?" he asked him. "No, be my guest," Crumb replied. "And I took him up on it," Reise says with a chuckle.

Reise's grounding in music goes back to his childhood; he studied, he says, with his father, who had been a protégé of Swiss-born composer, conductor, and instrumentalist Rudolph Ganz (his father gave up music as a profession, Reise relates, but other than that, he is reluctant to discuss him, describing him as intensely private). His parents were friendly with many prominent jazz artists, including composer-bandleaders George Russell and Jimmy Giuffre; in his early college years, Reise
He did not, however, settle upon music as a career so early, he says; he played piano well as a teenager, but he did not possess the drive and single-minded determination that is de rigueur for a successful soloist. "Some people take the next step and go to Curtis [the music institute, in Philadelphia], and then you have to make certain kinds of progress, and I was never willing to do that. I was always interested in sports and extracurriculars and a lot of different things," he says.

He maintained his interest in music as an undergraduate at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., but he took his bachelor's degree in English literature in 1972. By the time he graduated, however, he was prepared to take a decisive turn toward music, and he went on to study composition for a year at McGill University in Montreal. Then he came to Penn, for his master's degree in composition. He taught at Hamilton and then at its old sister school, Kirkland College, for a total of five years before returning, in 1980, to the University as a member of the music faculty.

Reise was promoted to associate professor in 1985; most semesters, he teaches an undergraduate and a graduate course. "They really balance," he says: "There's a freshness about the undergraduates, it's a lot of fun. And the graduate students—they've got an angle that they're interested in, which is just as it should be." Teaching, he says, provides certain rewards—exposure to composers and musicians, to ideas and approaches that the students are excited about. "It's not relaxing," he notes, "but I find it a really good antidote to composing."

This semester, his undergraduates are studying 19th-century harmony and his graduate students are analyzing 20th-century compositions. "We pick 'em apart and examine the techniques," he relates.

Though, he continues, the emphasis is usually technical. "We are capable of embracing incredible paradoxes within our own lifestyles, within our history, within our politics, within our art." Tracing and relating those paradoxes to musical ideas, he says, is important to the opera: "I was trying to reflect the sort of roller coaster that we all live through life to a certain extent. We experience such extremes in our lives—the ups and downs—and yet, they're all part of the same package. We deal with that on an emotional basis, and to some extent, I try to reflect that in the music."

At the dress rehearsal of Rasputin on September 14, I am again detained by City Opera officials less than thrilled by my presence, but I take the gesture less personally when a guard stops Reise at the gate as well and demands that someone vouch for him. Once inside the auditorium, I get my first glimpses of director Frank Corsaro, who hovers around the control panel placed over the seats a dozen or so rows from the orchestra pit, and of general director Beverly Sills, who sits near the control table eating a sandwich (I can't tell what the former diva is consuming, but it is on a Kaiser roll).

Reise's wife sits with their two small sons and a young woman who is introduced to me as a houseguest from Spain; there are perhaps another 100 people—critics from the New York papers and opera magazines, workmen, opera company administrators, friends— milling about. Christopher Keene can be overheard issuing commands clearly
Rasputin (right) strengthens his hold on the Tsar and Tsaritsa when he is able to stop their infant son's hemorrhaging.

As the curtain falls on the opening-night performance, applause is tempered by some boos and hisses, in turn eliciting a ripple of reaction from the crowd. The singers are received well. Reise is greeted respectfully, if not with wild abandon. When director Corsaro takes the stage, he is booted—if not en masse, roundly—and he reacts first by cupping his hands around his mouth to form a bullhorn and hooting back, then by shaking his fist vigorously at his detractors. It may not be decorous, but it is fascinating.

When I ask Reise if Rasputin is the biggest project he's undertaken, he laughs and gives a double assent for emphasis: "Oh yeah, oh yeah," he says, "in absolutely every sense of it. It's about five times longer than any other piece I've written." (Reise's compositions include three symphonies: the first, written in 1979 for voice and orchestra; the second, for large orchestra, commissioned by the Syracuse Symphony in 1980 and performed in a revised version in 1984 by the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Christopher Keene conducting; and the third, commissioned by the Long Island Philharmonic in 1983. He has also written works for string orchestra, wind quintet, string quartet, large and small chamber orchestras, choir, viola and piano, solo piano, cello and piano, solo clarinet, clarinet and piano, solo flute, and various other groupings—such as soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices with flute, harp, percussion, piano, and electric harpichord. Among the ensembles he has been commissioned to write for are the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Richard Wernick's Penn Contemporary Players, and the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia.)

Since he mentions Rasputin's length—about two and a quarter hours—and its sheer scope, I ask if he encountered problems in writing it. Not problems per se, he tells me, but certainly challenges. "It's much harder to control something like this," he confesses, "but the way that I hope I solved that was by treating each scene basically as a separate piece having its own separate musical identity, then linking other scenes thematically." He began the whole process by writing the libretto, after submerging himself in the history of the era and boiling the action down; even so, he says, the opera has changed a great deal from its original conception, and it was reduced to its present two-act form from a three-hour, three-act version that called for a cast more than twice as large. He doesn't regret the cuts, he says, although he is planning to revise the opera thoroughly after its run at Lincoln Center. A few of Reise's colleagues suggest to me that, in view of some of the critical reception of the scaled-down version, Reise may intend to restore Rasputin to its original form, and they suggest as well that he may be having second thoughts about complying with demands for cuts and condensation.

Ten days after the debut, I meet Reise in his office on campus, and we swap perspectives on the evening; he is particularly interested in mine because, he says, he is still so immersed in the opera and in the subject matter that he feels "slightly spacey" and because I have since spoken to Frank Corsaro, who dashed off after the performance to Los Angeles, where he is preparing a restored version of Jacques Offenbach's Tales of Hoffmann. Reise tells me that, at the second performance of Rasputin—a Sunday matinee—audience response was "very good: there were no..."
boos.” I point out that at the premiere, he was not booed; “No,” he says, “but I was ripped apart in The New York Times the next day, so I couldn’t very well say it was all receptive.”

Critical response to Rasputin was mixed. Times critic Donal Henahan (in a review that ran the following Monday, not the next day) dismissed it on all counts—musical, theatrical, and operatic—and lambasted Keene (“a heavy hand”), Corsaro (“no Brechtian staging . . . in his familiar sensationally sexual way”), and—especially—Reise (“a characterless melange of 20th-century styles”). New York magazine was no warmer. The Philadelphia Inquirer review lacked the blistering disdain of the others. Its critic, Daniel Webster, judged from Rasputin’s rowdy reception that “the work has said something too strong to be ignored.” But he also called its message and characters, even its music, “remote.”

Two weeks after his review in the Times, Henahan discussed Rasputin again, this time in a reflective piece in the Sunday edition. The vitriol was softened considerably, if the overall assessment of the opera was unchanged. Henahan noted that successful first operas are extremely uncommon and noted how difficult it was to present contemporary composers face in attempting to invest freshness and originality in opera; the best operatic talents, he observed, like Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner, used established theatrical conventions and musical forms, bending them, perhaps, to their individual purposes. Today's opera composers have no such tradition and, Henahan continued, often possess no definitive musical style; resorting to eclecticism—mining the past for inspiration and lodes of allusion—is a risky proposition, one that can yield an artistic pay-off in the right hands. That was not the case, he declared, in Reise's Rasputin. Henahan went on to tactfully approve of the New York City Opera's resolve in commissioning and presenting new works, and he went so far as to offer some consolation to Reise. But still, he deemed Rasputin a failure, probably impossible to repair.

Leighton Kerner, in The Village Voice, viewed Rasputin as a notable contrast to most new operas, most of which fail, he said, as compositions, even though they may be bolstered by expert production and performance. Kerner praised Reise's score (“Rasputin . . . has lots of strong music”) and found fault only with the opera's staging (he called it “badly focused”). He ap-

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE: Rasputin and his followers gather for a meeting of the Khlysty, a heretical religious sect. Rasputin preaches that salvation is achieved only through pain and mortal sin. When Iliodor, a zealous monk, challenges Rasputin by saying that he dares God to strike him down instantly if He is displeased. When Rasputin repels the guards, and the crowd quiets when he enters, greeting the Tsar in an address that runs the following Monday, not the next day. (Redacted to preserve coherence.)

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO: Prince Felix Yusupov and his friend Grand Duke Dmitry Pavlovich meet at a Winter Palace ball celebrating Russia's entry into the Great War; they discuss the Tsar's military naivete and the emergence of the peasant terrorists. In desperation, he gets a rented husband that she and Rasputin will save Russia. After urging Yusupov to join them, Rasputin symbolically proclaims Alexei the new Tsar.

ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR: At Yusupov's palace, Smersky, Dmitry and Zhevadov prepare poisoned wine and cakes to kill Rasputin. Yusupov arrives with Rasputin, who has been lured to the palace on the promise of cementing their alliance and of seeing Felix's wife Irina, who is purportedly upstairs giving a party. While waiting for Irina, Yusupov and Rasputin argue about the succession to the throne. As Rasputin repeatedly refuses the wine and cake, Yusupov grows increasingly nervous. When Rasputin finally accepts the refreshments, the poison has no effect. On the pretext of inquiring about Irina's delay, Yusupov periodically goes upstairs to confer with the conspirators. In desperation, he gets a revolver and shoots Rasputin. The assassins prepare to dispose of Rasputin's body in the river, and Yusupov abuses it when left alone. But inspired by spiritual voices, Rasputin revives, and the terrified Yusupov summons his friends, who brutally finish Rasputin off. His body is reclaimed by the Khlysty as revolution sweeps Russia and the Imperial family is executed.

THE RISE AND FALL OF RASPUTIN

A synopsis of Jay Reise's opera.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE: Nicholas and Alexandra enjoy a quiet moment with their infant son Alexei, the heir to the throne. Nicholas, however, is clearly distraught by the gunfire outside, and Alexandra is troubled by prophecies of Alexei's death. As Alexandra holds Alexei, Nicholas notices that the child's back is covered with blood. Alexei has hemophilia, and Sokolsky, the royal doctor, cannot stop the bleeding. Rasputin suddenly appears and, as if by magic, fires upon a mob attempting to storm the palace; when he go to mollify the crowd, Rasputin, with Alexander's approval, curtly dismisses Sokolsky. Alexandra berates herself for passing hemophilia on to her son, but Rasputin calms her by saying that the Mother of God has promised that Russia and Alexei will grow stronger together. Alexei will be saved, Rasputin vows, if Alexandra follows his advice.

ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR: Rasputin boasts that he has gained complete control over the Tsar and Tsaritsa. Nothing can prevent him from ruling Russia now.

ACT TWO, PROLOGUE: Lenin expands upon the need for revolutionary violence and terror.
proved of Reise’s merger of 19th- and 20th-century styles—“The core of his opera’s strength is its dramatically apt juxtaposition of tonal and atonal sequences”—and of Reise’s employment of radically different forms for each of the segments—“The score as a whole thus gives you a variety of weight and style that keeps the ear alert from scene to scene.”

Philadelphia Daily News music critic Bill Zakarian urged readers to “go see Rasputin, already—you may hate it, but you won’t be bored.” He found less fault with the opera’s staging than with its libretto, and though he called Reise “inept” as a librettist, he deemed him “an accomplished composer.” Describing the score as “eclectic,” he said it “evokes the tumultuous period immediately preceding the 1917 fall of Tsarist Russia.” The Washington Times, Octavio Roca accorded Rasputin the paper’s top rating characters, he does not take them, or their

—In the music of ‘Rasputin,’ says Reise, ‘I was trying to reflect the sort of roller coaster we all live through.’—

pitched when he grows excited, as he frequently does.)

The most important comment on Rasputin, Reise says, “one that disturbed me and is something I continue to reassess,” was that most reviewers felt outside the realm of the drama—“Its events keep listeners at a distance,” said Webster. Reise ruminates: “You have a situation in which you have a victimized family with a hemophilic son, which is heartbreaking; and on the other hand, you have a tsar who has been responsible for the pogroms and things like that; just how far do we draw in and not draw in? When the child has hemophilia and the empress is all upset, it’s a tragic situation—I can’t think of anything more human—yet, on the other hand, gunfire goes on outside all through the opera, and you know what’s happening out there is going to cause this huge revolution.

“Part of the paradox,” he continues, “part of the marvelous sense of contrast, is the very human versus the maniacal/demonic, one of the worst experiences of humanity, the stuff that’s happening in the 20th century—this tremendous insensitivity and slaughter that’s starting then will go on through the century. So I’m not so sure that I didn’t succeed in doing exactly what I wanted. As soon as you are drawn to a point of almost romantic catharsis, you’re thrown out of it. That’s the whole point.”

Reise describes Tsar Nicholas’s ineffectuality as a ruler and his increasing withdrawal into himself and his domestic affairs, the indifference to politics and to the internal disputes which led to the collapse of his empire. “I don’t know anybody who thinks that Nicholas was a great hero with a tragic flaw,” he exclaims: “He was a wimp! Talk about a wimp factor!”

But if he is not sympathetic to the characters, he does not take them, or their parts in history, at all lightly. “To me,” he elaborates, “it’s very serious, because, after all, these personalities were the ones who have made the world largely what it is today: their ineptitude led to world-wide collapse, to World War I, to revolution.” The perception of the characters and their fates, he says, was something he and Frank Corsaro had agreed upon. “As you’ve probably read,” Reise says, “people say the characters and characterizations are wooden. Yes, they’re wooden! Of course, they’re wooden! If they were all heart, and all wonderful, tragic figures, you wouldn’t have had what happened there!” Nonetheless, he is still mulling over the change of character, the changing of the character. “He suddenly sings a note, then sends the note soaring up the scale in a shriek. ‘Anyone can do that,’” he emphasizes—“that’s not falsetto.” (His own voice is hard to describe, probably because it is ordinary—a low tenor that becomes more highly

As for the ruckus at the premiere and the critical reception to Rasputin, Reise presents a cool and unruffled reaction: “I think I’m taking it all pretty well,” he says, and he is willing to provide his own perspectives on the commentary. Of Daniel Webster’s review, “It’s clear he had listened to the opera very carefully, and he had a very thought-out response to it,” Reise says: “There were certain things he picked up and took issue with—I agree with certain things, I don’t agree with others, but I thought that that review was fine.”

Some of Henahan’s accusations disturb him, however. “The inaccuracies in what he said regarding my opera were such that I didn’t recognize my own piece in it,” he says, warming to the topic: “He said the piece was primarily atonal; that the piece is mostly atonal, simply atonal, is simply not true. It’s mostly tonal, and the atonality springs from other things—it’s always an extension.” Of the complaint that the critic could not understand the words, Henahan had taken issue with some of the vocal techniques as well, especially the falsetto parts performed by baritone Cheek—a few keening lines that inched ominously above the musical background. “He said I didn’t know how to write for voice,” Reise recalls. The charge irritates him, and he details his consultations with Cheek once the singer had been hired; he had not rewritten the lines, but he altered some to accommodate the singer’s specific range. “I know the vocal tessitura,” Reise intones (using the Italian word for “texture” to indicate the prevailing or average position of a composer’s notes in relation to the range of a voice or instrument).

The falsetto, he says, was meant to reveal “the schizophrenic nature of the character, the changing of the character.” He suddenly sings a note, then sends the note soaring up the scale in a shriek. “Anyone can do that,” he emphasizes—that’s not falsetto. (His own voice is hard to describe, probably because it is ordinary—a low tenor that becomes more highly

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