The Repertoire Politics of Mamontov’s Enterprise: Francophilia, Wagnerism and the Nationalist Crusade

Le répertoire de l’Opéra privé de Mamontov Francophilie, wagnérisme et croisade nationale

Olga Haldey
The Moscow Private Opera (MPO), a private operatic enterprise sponsored and directed by Savva Mamontov (1841-1918), was one of Russia’s most innovative cultural institutions of the late 1890s. Founded upon its creator’s idealist vision of ‘serving beauty,’ it became a crucible for the emerging modernist trends in stage aesthetics, striving in each production to create a complete work of art – a perfect union of music, stage drama, and visual design. In scholarly literature, however, the company has until recently been discussed from quite a different ideological standpoint, particularly with respect to its repertoire policy. Ignoring Mamontov’s modernist experiments or dismissing them as temporary lapses in aesthetic judgment, researchers both inside and outside Russia have placed his activities squarely within the framework of the Russian nationalist movement. Their argument appears to be well supported by the documentary evidence, specifically, press reviews of the company’s productions. But this coverage, while thorough, was never dispassionate; instead, the ideological affiliations of the individual critics shaped their commentaries. Frequently, a review merely provided a pretext for initiating broader arguments on opera politics and aesthetics, promoting the reviewer’s own agenda and accompanied by enthusiastic stone throwing at his opponents. Careful analysis of the press coverage of Mamontov’s repertoire policy, as compared with the views reflected in his correspondence and realized in his decision-making reveals the public image of the MPO as the defender of Russian national art – the image promoted by the press – to be only part true, part Mamontov’s shrewd response to the critics’ own campaign, and part their wishful thinking.
From the moment it opened its doors in 1896, Mamontov’s company had to balance its aesthetic goals with the harsh reality of Russia’s theater market. This market was distrustful of private initiative, dominated by the powerful Imperial Theaters backed by the court, and divided by conflicting ideological agendas aggressively promoted by the warring factions of the press. The fledgling enterprise was immediately placed in a symbolic opposition to Moscow’s most venerable operatic institution – the mighty Imperial Bolshoi Theater. Up to that time, none of Moscow’s private theatrical ventures had survived the competition with this operatic Goliath; indeed, according to a respected critic Nikolaj Kaškin from the daily *Russkie vedomosti*, such competition would have been ‘a truly unthinkable idea.’ However, Mamontov had no choice. Beating the Bolshoi was a matter of survival: for his artistic agenda to be taken seriously, his company had to achieve two goals – prove its financial viability, and steal the spotlight, permanently, from its opposition, becoming ‘the place to be’ for Moscow’s cultural and intellectual elite.

The goals were ambitious, to say the least, and to achieve them, Mamontov first of all needed his company to be noticed. He immediately set out to court the members of the theatrical press corps whom he needed to generate excitement about the MPO that would convince distrustful Muscovites to walk through his doors. To that end, he cultivated publishers by purchasing expensive front-page advertising. He wooed critics with season tickets, exclusive box seats, and charity performances that targeted the causes popular in journalistic circles. A shrewd businessman, Mamontov was also familiar with a powerful advertising technique that he had once called ‘persuasion in an envelope.’ Yet, clever budgeting alone would not have led a resentful company soprano, Nadežda Zabela-Vrubel’ (1868-1913), to claim that ‘all the press’ was in Mamontov’s pocket. To get the press to pay attention, he needed to exploit the weaknesses of his competition while marketing his company as both commercially viable and ideologically radical, with a buzz-generating anti-establishment stand.

And the easiest line of attack on the establishment – that is, the court-sponsored theaters – was repertoire policy. Mamontov’s main competition, the Bolshoi Theater, had to have its playbill approved by the Ministry of the Imperial Household, and authorized new productions rarely and reluctantly, with many interesting works from both Russian and foreign repertoire vetoed as too complicated or too controversial. The situation was particularly appalling with respect to the composers of the New Russian School, or the ‘Kuchka’ – Modest Musorgskij, Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov, Aleksandr Borodin, and Cesar’ Kjui. In the mid-1890s, twenty years after many of their operas were written,

---

they were still known only to a narrow circle of enthusiasts, while the audience
at large had no access to them due to a lack of performances. Ironically, wrote
Kaškin, the name Musorgskij ‘was more familiar to the public from the press
war on his account than from his own works.’

The situation was becoming

absurd: as critic Ivan Lipaev argued (quite correctly) in the daily *Novosti sezona*, by now the kuchkist operas were better known in Western Europe than

in their own country:

While lectures on Musorgskij are delivered in Paris, and Kjui’s operas are

staged in Brussels, the majority of our citizens don’t even suspect how much

sympathy Russian composers inspire abroad.


After spending years laying siege to the Bolshoi Theater repertoire commit-
tee, with meager results, the Moscow critics were surprised and delighted when

Mamontov’s new company inaugurated its opening season with Rimskij-Kor-
sakov’s *Snow Maiden*. This rarely performed masterpiece of kuchkist repertoire

was followed by Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, Rimskij-Korsakov’s *Maid of Pskov*,

the much-touted stage premiere of Musorgskij’s *Khovanshchina*, and finally the
greatest public relations coup of all – the brilliantly staged world premiere of

Rimskij-Korsakov’s *Sadko*. Mamontov lobbied hard for *Sadko*’s production

rights. He knew that giving a home to the newest chef-d’œuvre of Russia’s most

important living composer – and a score already notorious for having been rejec-
ted by the Imperial Theaters – would bring the MPO unprecedented prestige,
cementing its place in the public eye as Russia’s most significant operatic stage

of the day.

As expected, the premiere of *Sadko* brought rapturous accolades from the

press; particularly from one increasingly influential group of critics – the na-

tionalists. Initially cautious in their responses to Mamontov’s company, they

increasingly came to regard the popular and influential newcomer as an ideolo-
gical ally in their dirty war for the elevation of Russian music. That worthy goal

justified any means. Mud slinging, name calling, guilt by association, and all

other kinds of verbal abuse were used to silence the few dissenting voices still

remaining in the Moscow press corps. The public was given no choice: the

media, the most powerful weapon in any ideological war, created a direct link
between musical taste and patriotism.

One of the most significant musical cha-

racteristics of *Maid of Pskov* was now its ‘Russianness.’ *Novosti sezona* edito-

rials discussed *Khovanshchina* as a ‘splendid proof of Musorgskij’s genius as a

national composer.’

---

Any true Russian was obligated to know and love Russian opera, as a columnist of *Petersburgskij listok* stated in his review of *Sadko*:

Those who have not seen it […] are not acquainted with one of the capital creations of our national art. National indeed, since *Sadko* is a purely Russian work from head to toe, and any real Russian who does not know it should be truly ashamed.5

By extension, anyone who disapproved of Russian opera was accused of not loving his country, as evident from a *Novosti sezona* editorial targeting St Petersburg critic Kugel’ for daring to publish a reserved review of *Sadko*:

This is not the first time that Mr. Kugel allows himself sneak attacks against everything Russian. Rather, he systematically advances such ideas. Mr. Kugel does not like Russian music; a Muscovite accent irritates his ear; Russian writers are illiterate, in his opinion; it seems the time is drawing near when Mr. Kugel declares that Russia as a whole is not to his taste.6

In their effort to promote ‘Russianness,’ many editorials were laced with anti-Semitic and xenophobic language. Specifically, the works of the New Russian School were presented as the ‘real Russian music,’7 compositions by Westernized locals like Čajkovskij were dismissed as ‘quasi-Russian,’8 while operas by Anton Rubinštejn and other assimilated Jews were clearly branded ‘foreign.’ As *Novosti sezona* once put it:

We do not dispute that the music of Meyerbeer, Rubinštejn, Mendelssohn and others is worthy of full respect and adulation, but would still ask […] to show just a little indulgence to the Russian composers as well.9

The juiciest quotes in the sample just given came from the pages of *Novosti sezona* – a thin, but highly influential publication in Moscow operatic circles. As the only daily in town exclusively devoted to the theater, *Novosti sezona* was a corner stone of Mamontov’s marketing campaign. Beyond the benefits of advertising revenue and season tickets, the newspaper enjoyed direct financial support through an exclusive contract with the MPO that almost quadrupled its circulation. Mamontov’s investment bought flattering editorials and attacks against other publications not sufficiently well-disposed towards his company. Yet, in pursuit of good publicity, he created a monster, as *Novosti sezona* used its good fortune to become the leader of the nationalist crusade waged by the Russian operatic press.

8. [N.a.], «Русская опера», *Новости сезона*, no. 318, 9 September 1897, p. 2.
The nationalists needed an example; an ideal to promote – that is, a successful opera theater whose repertoire policy would be in line with their aggressive ideological agenda. Mamontov’s success with the Russian repertoire made the MPO too attractive a model to pass up. Over the course of several months, in a series of reviews, feuilletons, and editorials, the critics set out to define and defend what they saw – or more precisely what they wished to see – as the company’s ‘mission.’ Its ‘great and sacred cause,’ as spelled out pithily by the daily Russkoe slovo, was ‘to serve exclusively Russian music.’ The same critics who early in Mamontov’s opening season complained bitterly about the deluge of foreign names on his playbill, a year later declared, with a straight face, that the MPO had always served as a hotbed of Russian music. It had inspired love for native composers and operas in society and stirred young people ‘towards national musical self-awareness.’ It had never betrayed ‘its banner on which memorable words, Native Art, are carved in golden script.’ Production reviews were filled with exclamations such as ‘glory and honor’ and expressions of gratitude for the company’s ‘great service to Russian art.’ Meanwhile, the Bolshoi theater was continuously targeted for ‘turning a deaf ear to the demands of the public and the press,’ and ridiculed for a cult of foreign (or ‘not-Russian-enough’) operas ‘so valiantly and so unsuccessfully’ promoted from its stage.

However justified was the crusade for the public recognition of Musorgskij, Rimskij-Korsakov, Borodin and other Russian opera composers, the myth of the ‘Moscow Private Opera, the defender of our native art’ created by the press had little to do with music. Instead, it had everything to do with politics. Unheard went the wise, lonely voice of the Russkoe slovo columnist Viktor Gartevel’d who argued that ‘an opera theater is not a political or administrative institution that should clearly express a specific agenda, but rather an artistic institution [that] should be above partisanship.’ Instead, Mamontov’s company was portrayed, to quote Novosti sezona, ‘as a purely ideological institution that pursues only the triumph of Russian art.’

As time went by, the tone of the MPO press coverage was increasingly guided by the critics’ need to preserve the image of Mamontov’s enterprise that they...
themselves had created. Compliance with the fictional image of itself earned the company glowing editorials and other benefits of preferential treatment. Non-compliance – such as staging foreign operas, which Mamontov stubbornly continued to do – invited a torrent of abuse, from quietly mutinous grumblings to open accusations of treachery and betrayal. For instance, Novosti sezona refused to review the first performance of the MPO’s 1897-98 season as its ‘true opening night,’ for the troupe presented Gounod’s Faust rather than a Russian opera; the newspaper opted instead for A Life for the Tsar matinee the following day. The value of foreign repertoire was consistently slighted or ignored. Thus, in his Novosti dnja review of a truly disastrous MPO premiere of Čajkovskij’s Oprichnik, Semën Kruglikov complained not that the opera was performed badly (which would have been justified), but that it followed a brilliantly staged ‘foreigner,’ the Russian premiere of Puccini’s La Bohème. And Nikolaj Kaškin whined in Russkie vedomosti that the time wasted on the ‘ill-fated caricature’ that was Gluck’s Orfeo would have been better spent rehearsing Rimskij-Korsakov’s May Night. 20

Mamontov had nothing against negative reviews – to him, all publicity was good publicity. However, in pushing the MPO to stage works from the Russian repertoire, the press had a very powerful ally, the ally he could not ignore – public opinion. The newly converted Moscow audience voted with its wallet, and the vote was unanimous. The newspapers repeatedly reported a full house at the performances of Khovanshchina; Sadko sold out Mamontov’s 2,200-seat theater fifteen times in less than two months 21. At the same time, according to Russkoe slovo, in as early as its third night the MPO’s most daring modernist production, Orfeo ‘was played before a completely empty hall, clearly depressing the performers.’ 22 As they say, the writing was on the wall – or rather, in the accounting books. If the company were to survive in the Russian opera market, it had to compromise. Aesthetic ideals had to be adjusted to the will of the public, and the national card had to be played. Initially, this caused no great problems for Mamontov. As we have seen, in the MPO’s early days he set out to exploit the critics’ obsession with the Russian repertoire to gain recognition for his company and secure a niche in the operatic market. Yet, even then assistant stage director Pëtr Mel’nikov recalls his boss literally ‘running off to Paris’ so as not to be present at the premiere of Prince Igor. 23 As time went by,

20. N. K-in, «Театр и музыка», Русские ведомости, no. 43, 12 February 1898, p. 3.
22. [n.a.], «Театр и музыка», Русское слово, no. 326, 4 December 1897, p. 3.
23. Mel’nikov to Mamontov, 8 July 1899 (RGALI – Russian State Archive of Art and Literature, F. 799, op. 1, delo 170).
Mamontov increasingly felt trapped in the aggressive rhetoric of rising nationalism and his own good intentions. As he would complain in a letter to Cesar’ Kjui, the omnipresence of ‘Slavs, princes, boyars, knights, boyarinas, peasants, [and] jesters’ on his stage was suffocating him. ‘Is there no beauty in other images?’ he asked. ‘Is it right to pander, without question, to the tastes of the mass audience, and is it not my duty as a leader of an artistic institution acquiring some significance and power in our multi-millioned village named Moscow, to push and promote other sounds and images, no less ennobling to the soul?’

As a businessman, Mamontov had to assess the situation realistically: as he once bitterly remarked, ‘we work for the Russian crowd, and if we are to survive and squeeze out the much-needed pennies, its peculiarities need to be taken into account.’ The company’s third season would be its most Russian ever, with ninety four performances of the native operas slotted against only nineteen of the foreign ones. As an artist, however, Mamontov never sacrificed his ideals merely for the sake of publicity. He refused even to consider staging mediocre creations by Ivanov and Solov’ëv, for example, despite the fact that both composers were also syndicated critics of Novoe vremja and Peterburgskaja gazeta respectively, and their good will could have provided free publicity for the company. Instead, Mamontov’s combative spirit attracted him to a different kind of free publicity – the one generated by staging The Maid of Pskov, Khovanshchina, Sadko and Boris Godunov, the masterpieces of the still controversial kuchkist repertoire that placated the nationalist press, did wonders at the box office, and also allowed him, on occasion, to smuggle in his own artistic agenda. For instance, the production of The Snow Maiden, whatever critics believed, was never meant as a nationalist statement: it was an aesthetic manifesto. Mamontov’s favorite opera, ‘a masterpiece of unity between text and music,’ it provided, as did Sadko, an opportunity for creating a stage spectacle that promoted the company’s goal of art synthesis. The Musorgskij productions, Khovanshchina and Boris Godunov that cemented the MPO’s place in history as the fortress of Russian nationalist art, were selected due to several important considerations beyond their country of origin. Both were classics of their genre; both were new to Mamontov’s audience; both were powerful historical dramas that showcased the company’s famed ensemble and crowd scenes, and utilized acting talents of individual performers led by the great bass Fёdor Šaljapin (1873-1938). And last but not least, due to Musorgskij’s having died without an heir, both could be performed royalties-free.

25. Mel’nikov to Mamontov, 8 July 1899 (RGALI, F. 799, op. 1, delo 170); emphasis in the original.
Despite the benefits derived from staging Russian operas, by the end of the 1898-99 season, Mamontov was ready to re-structure his repertoire policy to provide for a better balance between native and Western works. Perhaps, the most telling sign of this was a short announcement published in Moscow newspapers in April 1899, in which he offered his repertoire projections for the coming season. No new Russian operas were announced; at the center of the playbill were a German opera and a French one: Wagner’s *Die Walküre* and Offenbach’s *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*. This shift should not be perceived as unexpected or related only to Mamontov’s frustration with the MPO’s ‘Russian face,’ expressed in his correspondence. Instead, it reveals a telling sensitivity to an intriguing market trend that, along with the nationalist debate, shaped the operatic preferences of Moscow audiences in the late 1890s – the foreign policy of the Russian Empire.

In a letter to Mamontov dated May 1898, Pëtr Mel’nikov suggested that the MPO mount a Russian premiere of Jules Massenet’s new opera *Taïs*, adding that the event would provide an opportunity ‘to play once more on the Franco-Russian sympathies.’\(^{27}\) The remark refers to a rather unusual market situation the company encountered at the start of its inaugural season two years earlier. Finding itself at the lowest point of its tense relationship with Germany, Russia had recently signed an official friendship pact with France, a well-publicized event that enjoyed widespread public support. As with any other mood of the Russian society, its sudden Francophilia was reflected in its artistic life. At the start of the 1896-1897 theatrical season, Moscow newspapers reported packed houses at French opera performances, accompanied by strong displays of patriotism and French sympathies by the audience that frequently demanded ‘performances of the Russian anthem and the *Marseillaise*, each repeated three to four times.’\(^{28}\) Within a month of opening, the MPO staged as many as five French operas, four of them new to Moscow: *Faust*, *Carmen*, *Lakmé*, *Mignon*, and *Samson et Dalila*; all were sold out. One could argue (and Mel’nikov’s remark certainly points to it) that a deluge of foreign – and specifically Gallic – titles on MPO’s playbill that so irritated the nationalist press that season was Mamontov’s astute response to the signing of the Franco-Russian Alliance. On the other hand, public enthusiasm for all things French gave Mamontov an excuse to gratify his own interest in an operatic style whose lightness, grace, and elegance he admired. Featuring a French premiere in the 1899–1900 season would then also achieve multiple goals: provide a counterweight to the steady diet of Russian operas in the MPO repertoire; indulge Mamontov’s personal operatic taste; showcase his company’s strengths of performance ensemble and

\(^{27}\) Mel’nikov to Mamontov, 19 May 1898 (Bakhrushin Museum, fund 155).

\(^{28}\) I. L., «Частная опера», *Новости сезона*, no. 61, 1 October 1896, p. 2-3.
visual spectacle; and last but not least, playing ‘once more on the Franco-Russian sympathies.’

While French opera was the most fashionable offering on the Russian theater market of the late 1890s, and Russian one the most politically correct, Wagner’s music dramas were unquestionably the most controversial fare available. Increasingly on offer by the German troupes touring Moscow and St Petersburg, they routinely elicited a critical response from the locals that was nothing short of explosive. A small group of modernist critics could do little to shield Wagner from the vitriol of the conservatives who decried his decadent ideology and incomprehensible leitmotifs, and the nationalists who saw him as both intruder and competition. A true star of the anti-Wagnerian campaign was composer-critic Cesar’ Kjui, who proclaimed Wagner’s theories unhealthy and his operas worthless and pretentious. His explanation for the public interest in them was the power of ‘Wagner’s threatening name that has hypnotized our music lovers and holds them in terror and slavish obedience,’ 29 as well as the fear ‘that some famous foreigner might suspect us of ignorance.’ 30

As it often happens, the very controversy around Wagner’s name was attracting public interest to his music that, in the late 1890s, was still relatively unknown to Russia’s mass audiences. Wagner was clearly a hot commodity, which surely fueled Mamontov’s interest in Die Walküre: he knew how well controversy and scandal sold opera tickets. He also must have realised that his curiosity was bound to remain theoretical: MPO simply did not have strong enough voices or sufficient numbers in the orchestra pit to pull off The Ring. Announcing Die Walküre was then more an aesthetic call to arms than a repertoire ad: publicly expressing an interest in staging Wagner was a powerful ideological statement that – or so Mamontov hoped – would force the public face of the MPO as a nationalist powerhouse to be shed for a sharper, more modernist guise. And he was undoubtedly motivated by the fact that the creation of his company’s fictitious image was cemented by the nationalist media frenzy over an unexpected contest in which the MPO became embroiled the year before his Wagner announcement appeared in Moscow press.

In February 1898, in the wake of a disastrous fire that all but destroyed his base of operations, the Solodovnikov Theater, Mamontov decided to move his now homeless enterprise to St Petersburg for the Lenten season when the capital’s regular theaters were traditionally closed and their buildings rented out to touring troupes. The MPO settled in one of these, the Great Hall of the St Petersburg Conservatory, formerly an opera theater. And on the very same day its unsche-

29. С. Кjui, « Опера Вагнера: Моряк-скиталец », Новости и биржевая газета, no. 66, 7 March 1898, p. 3.
30. Id., « Московская частная русская опера », Новости и биржевая газета, no. 54, 23 February 1898, p. 3.
duled tour began, an illustrious German troupe, featuring some of Europe’s best singers and conductors, opened a series of Wagner performances across the street from them, at the Mariinsky Theater. Both tours were central events in the musical life of the Russian capital. Both troupes presented operas never before staged in the city. The competition between them was inevitable, and just as inevitable was the escalation of the Wagner wars in the press, with journalists from all sides of the ideological spectrum spitting fire at their opponents. Seeing an opportunity for free publicity, Mamontov was delighted to fan that fire: in a series of interviews that his lead singers, Fёdor Šaljapin and Anton Sekar-Rоžanskij gave to the press in conjunction with the tour, both used a Wagnerian catchphrase ‘music of the future’ in reference to Rimskij-Korsakov and Musorgskij’s approach to music drama. The reference gave rise to a heated debate in the press over the relative merits of the two ‘musics of the future.’ The conservatives begged to be excused from listening to either variety, while the kuchkists, unsurprisingly, used nationalist arguments to further their cause against both the conservatives and the modernists. Characteristic is the following proclamation that Kjui made after the Petersburg stage premiere of Khovanshchina:

Glory and honor to the Moscow Russian Private Opera that serves Russian art with such honesty and that brought us so much artistic pleasure last night, particularly after the foreign Valkyrie.31

Meanwhile, there was a certain section of the press that preferred the Moscow troupe to the Wagnerians for yet another reason: to them, any opera would have been preferable to a German one. The political tension between Russia and Germany that occasioned the signing of the French treaty appeared to have been resolved on a diplomatic level, and the court, thanks particularly to the young empress Alexandra, formerly a German princess, was becoming quite Germanophile. The public did not forget, however, that only recently the country stood on the brink of war. Like the Francophilia of 1896, the anti-German sentiments of 1898 spread to the opera theater. In some reviews of the Wagnerian troupe these sentiments were hidden, in others more openly displayed: favored among these critics were pointedly apocalyptic references to the legions of the Antichrist. For instance, a Petersburg correspondent of Novosti dnja likened the arrival of the Wagnerians to a foreign invasion, dropping satirical jibes on the court’s Germanophilia and referring by name to a German commander whose untimely demise was believed to have saved Russia from catastrophe:

31. Id., « Московская частная русская опера: Хованщина », ibid., no. 57, 27 February 1898, p. 3.
The season has opened today on all fronts. I cannot remember ever having such a variety of entertainment as that expected this Lent. Particularly numerous are German entertainers: [there] is such a legion, it’s terrifying. Had we not known that our relationship with the Germans was ‘most cordial,’ and that after the death of Moltke no new stratagems were being prepared, one might think that Landwehr battalions were infiltrating Russia disguised as opera singers, and that the Wagnerian opera was the latest version of the good old Trojan horse.  

Whatever their particular issue with the Wagnerian troupe, the majority of St Petersburg critics were delighted with the success of the MPO, which was not only standing up to its foreign rivals but actually beating them in the number of tickets sold. Newspapers reported with glee that the impresarios of the German troupe even petitioned the Russian government for taxation leniency, citing the competition from the Muscovites as the reason for their financial difficulties. Here is a colorful description of the repertoire battle reported by Quidam, the Novosti dniya critic responsible for the Trojan horse essay above:

The Wagnerian Germans sit gloomily on the riverbanks of Fontanka and Moyka and cry: the competition between the two ‘musics of the future’ is impossible, and one of them must perish. And at the time when ‘you cuckoo away, oh, dear cuckoo-bird’ is thundering triumphantly from the Conservatory Great Hall, a quiet and timid whisper comes from the Mariinsky Theater, saying: „Ich bin so traurig, ja, ja, so traurig, ich wahr doch niemals so traurig wie heute…”

The intense spotlight into which it was thrust by the press during its tour undoubtedly helped Mamontov’s company to vanquish its foe. Yet the fact that within a year, Mamontov was advertising his own Wagnerian production clearly shows his discomfort with the nationalist undercurrent of the Wagner wars. Meanwhile, the free publicity of daily press coverage and the controversy generated by the debate also allowed Mamontov to state his own aesthetic case to the sophisticated audience of the Russian capital. Not accustomed to taking provincial Moscow seriously, Petersburgers were now actively discussing the merits of the integrated approach to opera production demonstrated in the MPO’s staging of The Snow Maiden, Orfeo, and Sadko. The first St Petersburg tour of Mamontov’s enterprise turned out to be a triumphant success, due partly to its nationalist image constructed by the press, and partly to Mamontov’s ability to manipulate that image, both for commercial appeal and to promote his own aesthetic agenda.

32. Quidam, «Петербург », Новости дня, no. 5292, 23 February 1898, p. 3.
33. Quidam, «Петербург », ibid., no. 5302, 6 March 1898, p. 3.
Throughout its brief existence, being at the center of the ideological discourse provided the MPO with the visibility and clout needed to influence Russian staged art at a pivotal historical junction – the dawn of the modern era. It was the time of an aesthetic shift in Russian staged art, where multiple models of an operatic genre – among them Italian melodramas, French opéra lyrique, Musorgskij’s national epics, and Wagner’s Musik-Drama – coexisted in the same market and claimed the attention of the same audience. It was also the time of a major political shift: a time of changing alliances that would ultimately determine Russia’s position in WWI, just fifteen years away. The MPO showed skill and guile in navigating the unstable currents of this treacherous operatic market, rocked alternatively by Francophilia, Wagnerism, and jingoistic patriotism. Yet by aligning itself with the nationalist crusade the company allowed its true aesthetic mission of ‘serving beauty’ to be hijacked and supplanted, at least to a degree, by the aggressive philosophy of its friends in the press. It is this fateful decision, and decades of mythologized image making partly engendered by it, that until recently have clouded and distorted Savva Mamontov’s modernist legacy.