Comparative Analysis of Names in operas by N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov

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The operas of Nikolai Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov are masterpieces of Russian national expression, imbued with a sense of place and history that radiates through the careful construction of each element, especially the naming conventions [1].

First, let’s explore Снегурочка (Snegurochka), the opera which was written in 1881 and its titular character, both meaning “The Snow Maiden.” The opera is a vivid portrayal of folklore, based on the play by Alexander Ostrovsky which was written in 1874, and the central figure is a girl born of snow, the daughter of Spring and Frost. The very title immediately presents a translation challenge. The diminutive suffix “-ochka” is crucial, expressing vulnerability, youth, and a certain fragility. This suffix is common in Russian names, conveying endearment and affection, but the loss of this subtle nuance can significantly alter the character’s impact.

The English translation, “The Snow Maiden”, while accurate in conveying the basic meaning, lacks this emotional inflection. It simply states what the character is (a snow maiden) without conveying the delicate and somewhat ephemeral nature suggested by the Russian. The first traceable mention of “The Snow Maiden” in English literature appeared in 1874 in the “Slavonic Fairy Tales”, which is a collection of stories translated from Russian, Polish, Servian and Bohemian [7].

German often resorts to “Schneeflöckchen” or “Weißröckhen”, attempting to capture the diminutive effect, but in doing so, it fundamentally alters the original name. “Schneeflöckchen” and “Weißröckchen” first appeared in the book by Hedwig Haberkern, who published the song in her first book in 1869, 4 years before the original play by Ostrovsky. The German version comes from the Christmas carol. Weißröckchen, a Silesian (referring to a Lechitic group spoken by people in Upper Silesia) synonym for snowflake, does not appear in the original version of the text in the opening verse, only in the fourth to last line [6]. The choice of translation reflects a fundamental tension: whether to prioritize literal accuracy or capturing the intended emotional register [2].

Another opera we are going to look at is The Tale of Tsar Saltan (Сказка о царе Салтане), which was adapted by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1900. The English version of the name “Князь Гвидон” is “Tsarevich Gvidon”, which was first presented in 1917 in the translation by Post Wheeler in his collection of Russian wonder tales [9]. The translation of “Князь Гвидон” as “Tsarevich Gvidon” reflects a combination of linguistic accuracy and cultural interpretation. While "prince" is the more direct translation of "князь," "tsarevich" is used to emphasize Gvidon's royal lineage and to evoke the fairy-tale atmosphere of Pushkin's work. Both translations are valid, but "Tsarevich Gvidon" is more specific to the Russian context.

The German variation comes straight from the libretto translated by A. Bernhard. “Князь Гвидон” becomes “Fürst Gwidon”, which translates to Prince Gwidon. This is closer to the original due to the fact that the term "Fürst" has a long history in German-speaking regions, where it was used to denote rulers of principalities or high-ranking nobles. This aligns well with the role of Gvidon, who becomes the ruler of a magical island in Pushkin's tale [8].

Turning to Золотой петушок (Zolotoy Petushok), “The Golden Cockerel”, the opera itself was written in 1907 is based on the fairy tale by Alexander Pushkin, who wrote the fairy tale in 1834. The basic translation is straightforward, but Petushok contains a diminutive that suggests fondness. Speaking of origins of the translation, the English version dates back to the translation of the fairy tale by Henry Sutherland Edwards in his book “The Russians at Home”, which was published in 1861. In this book the author mentions Ivan Krilof as an influence for Pushkin’s Golden Cockerel, of which he then makes a retelling to familiarize the reader with the material [3].

Speaking of German translation, we can trace a line of origin back to 1785, 50 years before the “The Golden Cockerel” was published. That year, “Der goldene Hahn” by Friedrich Maximilian Klinger was published, which is believed to serve as one of the many influences that created the fairy tale by Alexander Pushkin. The story mentions a golden rooster that signifies danger [5].

In summary, analyzing the names reveals the challenges of translation and the significance of cultural context. While translation is a necessary process, and one that preserves the meaning of the work overall, the subtle nuances, cultural associations, and folkloric elements are often lost or changed. By studying these differences, we can enhance appreciation for the work, and the complexities of intercultural art. The sound and meaning also reveal much about the Russian language.

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