# Alexander Kipnis: The Artistry and Voice Live On

Author note 2024: I wrote this article in 2003 for Opera News, which had commissioned me to write it. After I submitted it, the editor at the time told me that they would not publish it because they had decided not to publish any articles on historical singers. But I am glad to share this article with you now.

by Barry Lenson

In his book *The Metropolitan Opera 1883-1966: A Candid History*, Irving Kolodin reports that when Alexander Kipnis’s name was announced at the closing ceremonies for the old Met on April 16, 1966, something extraordinary occurred: “. . . when the great Boris and Hagen, Alexander Kipnis, strode in, all the bassos stood up.” According to Kolodin, only a handful of singers were accorded such recognition that night by both the audience and their peers – among them Kipnis, Giovanni Martinelli, Elisabeth Rethberg and Lotte Lehmann.

Today, many opera lovers might not understand why Alexander Kipnis was placed in such a lofty company by those who heard him perform or shared his stage. Of course, Kipnis is not unknown today. Yet when connoisseurs of great singing make their lists the greatest singers of the past century, Kipnis’s name is sometimes scribbled in the margin as an afterthought. You have to wonder why. Consider this review of a 1935 recital from *The Manchester Guardian.* It sounds extraordinary, but is really a fairly typical account of what the great Kipnis brought to the stage . . .

“He is a singer of extraordinary beauty, endowed with the incomparable bass quality which seems the Russian birthright, a quality made sensitive by culture gained in a cosmopolitan school. Kipnis is really an opera singer; but he is able to adjust his technique to the smaller and intimate canvas of *Lieder* . . . he is so direct in his expression that he can get his effects by means of a few colours. His soft singing is more beautiful than any I have ever before heard from a bass singer; it is remarkable, indeed, to find a bass singer approaching anywhere near the fragile devotion of Schubert’s *Du bist die Ruh* and Schumann’s *Mondnacht*. Yet Kipnis makes such songs his own; he can sweeten masculinity with a poignant enough tenderness. He is, in his own way, a magnificent artist. I rank him superior to Chaliapine in vocal culture, in sincerity of technique and of imagination.”

If Kipnis was really that glorious a singer, why is he sometimes set aside today? There are several reasons. First, he departed the stage in 1946, leaving only 78rpm recordings behind. In the hi fi-infatuated decade that followed, even his reissues on LP suffered in aural comparison with the new 33rpm disks.

Timing accounts for still another reason why Kipnis still seems to be misunderstood in America. When he arrived at the Met in 1940, he was widely regarded as the finest operatic bass of the day. He had been the leading bass at the Berlin Charlottenberg Opera (later the Städtische Oper) for eleven years, then triumphant at the Staatsoper before fleeing Germany. At Bayreuth, Vienna, Salzburg, Buenos Aires, Covent Garden, Chicago and elsewhere, he was hailed as an unequaled interpreter of King Philip, Hagen, Sarastro, Mephistophèles, Leporello and Boris, among other leading roles. By rights, he should have been accorded a triumphant Met debut as Boris, one of his signature roles which was in the Met repertory when he arrived there in 1940. Instead, he was quickly shuttled into the German wing and made a bow as Gurnemanz.

Politics were almost certainly at work. Pinza, the reigning Met basso of the day, had staked his claim as the company Boris and Kipnis did not get his chance to sing the role with the company until 1943. This classification of Kipnis in New York as a “German” bass could be a reason Kipnis is not quite understood today.

Fortunately, the Kipnis recordings that have been remastered to CD allow us to rediscover this bass’s remarkable ability to sing as well as anyone ever has across a staggering range of repertory. In just a few hours of listening, we discover a colossal-sounding Wotan who could equally well toss off a lithely comic Leporello, a formidable Sarastro whose deeply human Arkel once brought Mary Garden, his Mélisande, to tears on stage, a thundering Boris who at the time was the leading interpreter of the *Lieder* of Brahms, Strauss and Wolff. And, oh, what a King Marke!

Then there is a third reason why Kipnis’s renown is clouded today. It is the mystery of the man himself. Just who was he? Where did he come from? Even the name Kipnis, unusual as the man himself, doesn’t immediately drop him neatly into a preexisting category like “Russian Bass.”

The Origins and Early Years

Nuchim Kipnis, later called Alexander, was born on February 1, 1891 in Zhitomir, Ukraine. The Kipnis family—Alexander, his parents, a younger brother and three sisters—all lived in a wretched two-room clay hut in the Jewish ghetto on the outskirts of town.

In later years, Kipnis (whom we can call by his lifelong nickname, Sascha) remembered that Machlya, his mother, was a woman of some culture who liked to hum Schubert’s “Ständchen” and tunes from *Rigoletto* around the house. Music entered his life from another source too. “During the evenings,” Sascha later told one interviewer, “we heard music in the distance. People were singing old, slow, sad Ukrainian songs. My ears were opened. I learned those songs and sang them.” Only once did Sascha try to sneak into the city to hear a concert in a park. There, he was clubbed by a policeman, called a “dirty Jew,” and told to go back where he belonged.

Shuya, Sascha’s father, was a domineering man—a carter who went from village to village selling feathers and heavy cloth for coats. Late in life Sascha recalled, “He drove a little wagon with one horse, the roads were full of water, and very often the carriage fell into the water, and he had to lift it out with his strong, big shoulders . . . They paid him a little percentage if he sold something.” When Sascha was twelve, Shuya died a harrowing tubercular death at home. Sascha later recalled, “all that blood . . . father came home and lost his lungs.”

In the face of such misery, other young men might have given up hope and withdrawn. Not Kipnis, who instead developed an intense drive for self-betterment. After his father’s death, Sascha took a job as a carpenter’s apprentice, where his strength and intelligence made him the family breadwinner. Next, he discovered another way out of poverty: “I was twelve years old. I had a good soprano voice.”

He auditioned for a cantor who had come to Zhitomir to recruit boys for synagogue choirs. Sascha was hired on the spot, and went to sing in Novybug, a town more than 200 miles away. Eager to learn while there, Sascha arranged to polish the boots of a bass in the choir in exchange for music lessons. “The first song I learned was very peculiar, ‘der Leiermann’ by Schubert,” he later recalled. “And I sang it almost everywhere, it fit so my mood. A very, very sad song, very beautiful.”

Then at age fourteen, Sascha’s voice changed. He lost his choir position and returned to Zhitomir where he joined a traveling Yiddish theater troupe where he soon made another discovery: an emerging bass voice. “I started to sing and the shell of this raw egg started to grow, and my voice became strong and good, a good mechanic sound.”

When Kipnis heard that a tenor from the troupe was about to sing high holiday services in Rovno, a city not far from Kiev, Kipnis found a way to go along. The holiday engagement turned into a long-term one and Sascha stayed on for more than a year. He attended his first opera, a touring performance of *The Queen of Spades,* and began to fantasize about obtaining a *bona fide* musical education. “AI was dreaming,” he later stated, “but in order to study music I needed a graduation certificate from a *gymnasium* [a Russian high school]. I didn’t have it and couldn’t enter the conservatory in Moscow or Leningrad.”

Then Sascha learned that the Warsaw Conservatory did not require a gymnasium diploma of entering students. A simple audition could open the doors. When Sascha learned that a cantor he knew in Rovno was about to take a new post in Siedlce, a Polish town near Warsaw, he found a way to go along too. Then after the high holiday services of 1910, he moved to Warsaw and quickly secured jobs at a synagogue and as a member of the company at the Kampaneits, the famous Jewish repertory theater.

With his income assured, Kipnis entered the Warsaw Conservatory and began studies to become a bandmaster. As always, Sascha had a practical reason: “I was growing older, and I realized I would have to serve in the Russian army. As a conductor of a military band, I could avoid becoming a soldier.”

He studied trombone, but it was his voice that attracted attention. “I sang in the chorus and during one rehearsal the conductor said to me, ‘Your singing is so much better than the others, why don’t you develop your voice?’” So Sascha began to study with the Conservatory’s singing teacher, a man named Giustiniani. He also attended performances at the mighty Warsaw opera house, the Teatr Wielki, which presented prominent singers from Italy, Germany and Poland. Throughout his life, Sascha singled out one of these artists for special praise. It was the illustrious Italian baritone Mattia Battistini, who had made his Warsaw debut in 1894 and was a frequent guest there over the next two decades.

At age twenty, Kipnis graduated with his bandmaster’s diploma. But it was 1911, war loomed, and he was soon to be conscripted into the Russian army. He had no intention of serving and began making preparations to move to Berlin, from where he could not be drafted. Russia was eager to stem the exodus of young men of military age, so obtaining a Russian passport was no easy matter. An immigration lawyer obtained one for Sascha for the daunting sum of 40 rubles which Sascha saw as an investment in his future. He knew other singers who had already left Berlin who, “ . . came back after a year with suitcases packed with beautiful suits and shoes and socks. My plan was ready, I was going to Berlin!”

Passport on hand, Kipnis took a train to Berlin. With the assistance of some Russian and Polish expatriate friends, he soon found a room to rent. Yet Sascha’s dreams of a prosperous life dimmed when he saw how perilous existence was for aliens living in Germany. Kipnis’s friends from his earlier years - a bass named Katz and a tenor named Shapiro - were living with falsified documents, in constant fear of being sent home.

At their urging, Sascha secured a position in the operetta chorus at Berlin’s venerable Theater des Westens, where he appeared in six or seven operettas a week. “Every night,” he later recalled. “And they asked me, please don’t sing so loud, we can’t hear the soloists. I had to sing softly, but it paid very well.”

Kipnis also got a new synagogue job. He bought a new suit and a collapsible top hat so he could dress as a mourner and earn money in a paid funeral quartet. Despite the uncertain political climate, Sascha was on his way to having that suitcase full of nice clothes. At this time, Kipnis wrote to his mother, begging her to flee Russia and join him in Germany. It was a painful exchange that Kipnis apparently shared with only one interviewer, his daughter-in-law Judy Kipnis. She later recalled that, “He wrote to his mother that he had a little more money. He wanted her to come join him, but she wouldn’t. I don’t think he was in contact with her again.”

Kipnis soon secured a place in the vocal studio of Ernst Grenzebach, one of the most prominent voice teachers in Berlin at the time. In addition to Sascha, Grenzebach’s studio produced such singers as Max Lorenz, Lauritz Melchior, Herbert Janssen, Maria Ivogün and the great German soprano Meta Seinemeyer who, according to Kipnis’s son Igor, was Sascha’s first great love.

At Grenzebach’s urging, Kipnis prepared Tchaikovsky’ song “Nur Wer die Sehnsucht Kennt” and auditioned for Berlin’s conservatory, the Klindworth-Scharwenka-Institut. “I sang it quite impressively and they decided I’m worthy to be a student of them,” Kipnis recalled. The head of the opera studio, Felix Dann, noticed at once that he had an unusually valuable student in Kipnis, and offered him a notable student showcase. “They hired a theater and the best students had the opportunity to show what they had learned,” Kipnis recalled. “After two years of studying there, I was asked to sing Hunding at the Theater des Westens. We rehearsed day and night for weeks and months. Finally the day came and . . . I did not sing it too bad, but also not too good either. ‘Non c=è male,’ as Toscanini used to say.”

Sascha was making extraordinary progress. Yet the new war threatened to put an end to it all. In the spring of 1914, he was dismissed from all his paying jobs because he was a Russian national. He was without income.

Ernst Grenzebach came to Sascha’s aid, obtaining for him a stipend from an organization that aided needy artists. Grenzebach also was a friend of a certain Baron von Mutzenbecher whose brother was Dr. Kurt von Mutzenbecher, *Intendant* of the Wiesbaden opera. The baron hosted evening musicales in his home where Sascha and other singers entertained in exchange for meals. Soon, an opportunity came Sascha’s way. After singing at a soiree where the Wiesbaden *Intendant* was present, he was offered a five-year contract to appear there, starting in 1917.

Grenzebach, apparently a savvy promoter of talent, immediately arranged for Sascha to audition for the Hamburg Opera too. Kipnis’s recollections of his audition are savory indeed. “I sang King Marke’s monologue from *Tristan*.. . . I sang, and he said to me, ‘Are you free?’ And I told him, ‘I am engaged to Wiesbaden for 1917.’ And he said, ‘All right, we will engage you for the next two years.’ This was a real offer. The Hamburg Opera was second to Berlin, really the top.”

It was an immense achievement for a young, foreign singer. Yet unexpected events again nearly scuttled Sascha’s good fortune. Contract or no, he was still an enemy alien and could not work. Obstacles needed to be rolled from his path, and quickly. So Sasha’s friends came up with an ill-advised scheme. They urged him to write to the Military Commander of Berlin, asking to become a naturalized German citizen. They assured Sascha that he would quickly obtain permission to work. The plan made Kipnis uneasy. “I said, ‘But I don’t want to be a German.” And they said, ‘You cannot be naturalized during the war, it is law.’”

Yet Kipnis wrote the letter anyway, saying “How I admire Germany, how I had decided to give up my Russian citizenship.” Soon he received permission to go to Hamburg for rehearsals. But there, further complications arose and he had to report to police headquarters daily so authorities could monitor his whereabouts. On or about August 16, 1915, a troubling message was waiting for him when he checked in. Would he please report to city hall in Berlin the following day? Kipnis got permission to leave rehearsals, took the train to Berlin and reported in as ordered, only to be told by a police officer, “Please come with me.”

Sascha went along, realizing at the last moment that he was being escorted to police headquarters in the Alexanderplatz. He later recalled that, “We entered there, and he said, ‘Come up to the second floor.’ It was a prison! And then he shouted to a guard, ‘Here’s a Russian! Take him!’ They arrested me. I was so sorry. I was right in the middle of studying *Masked Ball*. I couldn’t even have singing lessons, and there I was sitting in a single room. No communication, nothing.”

Sascha sat in the dark little cell for two or three days, refusing to eat prison food, which he feared might be spoiled. And, in Kipnis’s words, “One day I was so sad, so I started to sing to myself, to vocalize and sing a song. There were small high windows separating the cells, blocked by bars. And then suddenly I heard a voice. ‘Kipnis, are you there?’ And I said, ‘Yes, who’s there?’ ‘Oh, it’s Shapiro.’” It was Sascha’s expatriate friend.

When the guards learned the two men were acquaintances, they took pity and allowed them to sit together for the next few days until Kipnis was released from jail and allowed to resume rehearsals back in Hamburg. “There was a very fine Jewish painter in Berlin,” Kipnis later explained. “He found out I had been arrested, guaranteed that I was not a spy, so they released me.”

He returned to rehearsals at the Hamburg Opera where, on September 3rd, 1915, he made an unofficial debut singing some Strauss songs as a party guest in Act II of *die Fledermaus.* Three days later, his *bona fide* debut came as the Hermit in *Der Freischütz.*

The rest of the Kipnis story is relatively well known and documented, unlike the account of his early years reported here. Soon, in his Wiesbaden years, he would began to make remarkable recordings for Odeon and then join a traveling company called The Wagnerian Opera Festival for a tour of America. In Chicago he would marry, establish a foothold in America and obtain U.S. citizenship in 1934.

At every stage, there were bright shining stars and periods of darkness in his remarkable life. We might point to his triumphant Berlin years, to his Wagnerian triumphs at Bayreuth, to his Salzburg Zauberflöte with Toscanini or his *Lieder* recordings for the Hugo Wolf Society. We could offer him our gratitude for his early recognition of Kirsten Flagstad in Norway and for paving the way for her entry into the operatic mainstream. We could point to his complete *Boris* recording for RCA Victor, made right after Pinza’s, which arguably puts his Italian colleague’s to shame. We could cite his heroic concerts in pre-war Germany before Jewish audiences under the aegis of the German *Kulturbund* (right under the nose of Goebbels who liked Kipnis’s singing and tried to keep him in Germany). That was possible for a time because Kipnis, though a Jew, had obtained his American citizenship in 1934.

“It was a remarkable life in every way,” his son Igor, the great harpsichordist, once summarized when talking about his father. Remarkable, indeed. We can savor his astonishing legacy for as long as recordings survive.