

ADOLPHE JOSEFOVICH CHARLEMAGNE

(St. Petersburg 1826 - St. Petersburg 1901)

The Road to Chernomor

signed in Cyrillic (lower right), variously inscribed in Cyrillic (near each figure)
watercolour and gouache on paper
17 x 21cm (6¾ x 8¼ in)

Provenance: A gift from the artist to Vladimir Eduardovich Napravnik;
thence by descent.

THIS DRAMATIC WORK IS BASED ON ONE OF ALEX-
ander Pushkin's (1799-1837) better known fairy-tales, *Ruslan
and Ludmilla*. Pushkin began writing the poem in 1817 while
attending the Imperial Lyceum at Tsarskoe Selo. He based it on
folk tales that he had heard as a child, and the first edition of the
story was published in 1820. The story was also made into an opera by the
Russian composer, Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857).

Four knights, including the hero Ruslan, set out to find Princess Ludmilla
who has been kidnapped by the wicked sorcerer Chernomor. In *The Road to
Chernomor*, the sorcerer's hat can be seen balanced atop a signpost directing
the hopeful knights towards his lair where the unfortunate Ludmilla has been
incarcerated. Ruslan is decked out in a splendid suit of armour and distinguished
from the others by his flamboyant turquoise-plumed helmet. The names of the
heroes are even written faintly in Cyrillic beneath their portraits.

Adolphe Josefovich Charlemagne's faithful representation of the four
horses derives from his patient study of the animals in a number of his other
works, particularly in the battle scenes for which he is most renowned. While
not a great deal is known about Charlemagne's life, his importance as an artist
can be deduced from the number of imperial commissions that he received.
A number of compositions record events such as the funeral procession of
Alexander II (1818-1881) and recreations of scenes at the court of the Empress
Catherine II (1729-1796) (fig. 1).

Charlemagne entered the Academy in 1848 where he studied historic
painting under Feodor Antonovich Bruni (1799-1875) and battle painting
with Bogdan Pavlovich Villevalde (see cat. no. 110). He spent the majority of
his career working on official commissions which recorded the major events
in the reign of Alexander II, and in 1875 he was awarded the title of Artist of
His Imperial Majesty.

This work comes from a unique album of drawings, watercolours, musical
quotations and letters, collected by the son of Eduard Frantsevich Napravnik
(1839-1916), Vladimir. As chief conductor of the Mariinsky Theatre from the



Adolphe Josefovich Charlemagne, *Catherine II at Court*, 1862,
Private Collection (Figure 1)

1868 until his death in 1916, Eduard Napravnik occupied one of the most
important roles in Russian musical life. He led the world premieres of many
of the late nineteenth-century operas which today constitute the nucleus of
the classical Russian repertory including Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's (1844-
1908) *The Night before Christmas* and Pyotr Tchaikovsky's (1840-1893)
Queen of Spades. Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1888) even mentions the great
conductor in his book, *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'Mr. Napravnik is our well-
known Russian orchestra conductor'.¹ The conductor also delivered the second
public performance of Tchaikovsky's celebrated *Pathétique* Symphony (no. 6)
a week after the composer's death, restoring the music to its rightful place after
a disastrous premiere.

¹ Dostoyevsky, F., *The Brothers Karamazov* (Penguin Books, London, 1880), Book 2,
Chapter 2.

