



BORIS GODUNOV
MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Opera Guides



Fyodor Chaliapin as Boris. The unforgettable experience of Chaliapin's performance has been many times described: Victor Gollancz in 'Journey Towards Music' likens the voice 'to Casals' cello — above everything . . . some unanalysable residue in his voice and way of singing made him unique'. (Stuart-Liff Collection)

Preface

This series, published under the auspices of English National Opera and The Royal Opera, aims to prepare audiences to enjoy and evaluate opera performances. Each book contains the complete text, set out in the original language together with a current performing translation. The accompanying essays have been commissioned as general introductions to aspects of interest in each work. As many illustrations and musical examples as possible have been included because the sound and spectacle of opera are clearly central to any sympathetic appreciation of it. We hope that, as ideal companions to the opera should be, they are well-informed, witty and attractive.

Nicholas John
Series Editor

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Looking into 'Boris Godunov'

Robert W. Oldani

On January 27, 1874 (Old Style), Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* received its first performance at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. Several of the most popular singers of the Maryinsky troupe took part, including Ivan Melnikov as Boris, Yulia Platonova as Marina, and Osip Petrov as Varlaam. The conductor was Eduard Napravnik, a Czech musician and composer who altogether would spend more than forty years as the chief conductor of the Maryinsky. The sets were probably those created more than three years earlier for the première of Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, the play from which Mussorgsky had derived his libretto.

Even then, the opera was presented in a form notably different from the form in which the composer finally had left it; Napravnik omitted, for instance, the entire scene in Pimen's cell. Thus, from the beginning, one is confronted with the central irony concerning *Boris Godunov*: rarely has it been performed as the composer wrote it. Much of the blame, of course, rests with Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, whose revision of the opera has held the stage now for three-quarters of a century, but some must rest with Mussorgsky himself, who completed two distinct versions. Additional redactions by other musicians, including Dimitry Shostakovich, further complicate the matter. The producer of *Boris Godunov* thus faces many alternatives, and the problem is only partly solved by confining oneself to 'what Mussorgsky wrote'. The purpose of this essay, then, is to place the opera in the context of its time, to sketch the history of its composition and first performance, and to acquaint the reader with some of the facts of the so-called 'Boris problem'.

For more than a century before Mussorgsky's birth, both foreign and native musicians had composed opera in Russia. In the eighteenth century the genre thrived primarily at the Imperial court, and foreign works, largely by Italian composers, were both more numerous and more popular than native ones. Works based on heroic and patriotic subjects became popular after Napoleon's defeat in 1812, and the crowning achievement among such works, performed for the first time in 1836, is Mikhail Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, based on the tale of a peasant – Ivan Susanin – who sacrifices his life to save Tsar Mikhail, founder of the Romanov dynasty. Glinka's opera impressed the emperor Nicholas I favourably: in Gerald Abraham's words, to see *A Life for the Tsar* became almost 'a patriotic duty', and Glinka 'found himself recognized as "the first composer in Russia"'.

First composer or not, Glinka discovered in the 1840s that his countrymen had not entirely lost their taste for Italian opera. His second opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, although musically more advanced than *A Life for the Tsar*, was received with far less excitement. According to the composer's memoirs, 'the applause [at the première in November 1842] was really not very enthusiastic and there was some active hissing . . .'. By contrast, when the Italian tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini visited St Petersburg in 1843, giving several concerts during Lent, he provoked great enthusiasm. The critic for the newspaper *Northern Bee* wrote:

What is there to say about Rubini? . . . Whether he sang better at some time we do not know, but we believe that with merely a human throat *it is impossible to sing better!* . . . This is not a voice, but some pure stream of harmony falling from heaven and penetrating the heart! To speak of art? It was taken up to the highest degree, to the *ne plus ultra!*

Rubini's success led to the rebirth of Italian opera in St Petersburg. Each year from 1843 until 1885 the Director of the Imperial Theatres engaged foreign singers to perform a season of opera in Italian in the capital. Although another company, composed primarily of native singers, performed foreign and native works in Russian throughout the period as well, in the 1840s and 1850s they sang in the shadow of the Italians.

In the 1860s, however, opportunity presented itself to Russian singers and composers. For several reasons, the popularity of opera in Italian declined, and opera in Russian, by both Russian and foreign composers, began to enjoy greater success than it ever had before. For example, Verdi's *Forza del Destino*, commissioned by the Imperial Theatres and given its first performance by the Italian troupe in 1862, was lampooned by one Russian writer as yet another 'tragedy in blood' by the cynical composer of such masterpieces as *Suicide When the Horn Sounds*, *Assassination in America*, and *The Tubercular Tart*; another critic begged to hear Glinka's music as an antidote to Verdi's. As though in answer to this prayer, the Maryinsky company successfully revived *Ruslan and Lyudmila* in 1864. Furthermore, Alexander Serov's *Judith* (1863), based on the Apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes, and *Rogneda* (1865), based on a tale of Kievan Russia, both enjoyed great and immediate popularity.

Mussorgsky made his first serious attempts to compose an opera in these auspicious years. He began *Salammbô*, based on Gustave Flaubert's tale of ancient Carthage, less than six months after the successful première of *Judith*, probably while under that work's spell. Although he worked on the score intermittently for three years, he finished just six numbers, about ninety minutes of music, some of which ultimately found its way into *Boris Godunov*. After another false start, an almost word-for-word setting of Nikolay Gogol's prose comedy *The Marriage*, he finally found in a suggestion by his friend Vladimir Nikolsky the subject for which he had been searching — Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. But by that time, October 1868, the years of decline at the Italian opera were nearly over. Less than three months after Mussorgsky had written the first bars of *Boris Godunov*, Adelina Patti made her triumphant debut in St Petersburg. She became so popular that she was re-engaged each year until 1877. And during the nine years in which Patti and the Italian repertory so suited to her talents reigned over opera in St Petersburg, *Boris Godunov* was composed, rejected for production, revised, and given its première.

*

Like so many other young Russians of his day, Mussorgsky was fascinated by his country's past. In 1858, upon visiting Moscow, he had been awestruck by the Kremlin and St Basil's Cathedral, describing them as 'sacred antiquity'. Later, he enthusiastically read the works of such historians of his native land as Nikolay Karamzin and Sergey Soloviev, and he once confessed to his friend Vladimir Stasov: 'History is my nocturnal mate — I absorb it and more than enjoy it, despite my weariness and my dismal mornings at the office'.

But in the early 1860s, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* would have been an impractical choice of subject for any composer. Although the play had been written in 1825, published in 1831, and reprinted several times after the poet's death in 1837, the tsarist censor did not approve it for performance on stage until 1866. It finally received its first performance in September 1870. Despite the work's literary excellence, it seems to have been unsuccessful in the theatre; only the sets were praised uniformly for their beauty and historical accuracy. According to one theatre historian 'The performance was facile, even, and conscientious, but no one was remarkably distinguished . . . The highly poetic scene by the fountain passed by limply. The comedy with couplets *The Claws of St Petersburg* by Messrs Khudyakov and Zhulev had an incomparably greater success'.



Boris Christoff, the Bulgarian bass who first sang Boris at Covent Garden in 1949, in the coronation scene.

In the autumn of 1868, midway between the censor's approval of the play and its performance, Mussorgsky began his opera. Work progressed rapidly, and the entire project – from compilation of the libretto to orchestration – was completed by December of 1869. This initial version of the opera contains seven scenes grouped in four parts, as follows: Part One: Courtyard of the Novodievichy Monastery and Coronation; Part Two: Pimen's Cell and An Inn on the Lithuanian Frontier; Part Three: The Tsar's Apartments in the Kremlin; Part Four: The Square before St Basil's Cathedral and Boris's Death. There is no Polish Act and no scene in Kromy Forest in the initial version.

When Mussorgsky completed his score, no opera was produced at the Maryinsky Theatre without first being examined by both a literary and a music committee, whose task was to prevent a work with either a poor libretto or bad music from reaching the stage. In addition, usually before reaching these committees, an opera had to pass through the state censorship, where its libretto faced close scrutiny. Neither the composer's prestige at home nor his European fame exempted his work from these examinations. Anton Rubinstein, for example, enjoyed far greater prestige than Mussorgsky in the 'sixties and 'seventies, but his opera *The Demon* passed through the same trials as *Boris Godunov*. The music committee accepted *The Demon* in September of 1871, but the censorship at first refused to permit the performance of a work in which an evil spirit was portrayed, and the première of Rubinstein's work was delayed for more than three years.

Mussorgsky submitted his opera in 1870. Although it unquestionably faced problems of censorship – a specific rule against showing any Tsar on stage in opera, vaguer prohibitions against so-called harmful attitudes and anti-governmental tendencies – we have good reason to suppose that it received the censor's approval, but the Maryinsky's music committee rejected it by a vote of six to one. According to the memoirs of Rimsky-Korsakov, written some thirty-five years after the event, the reasons for this rejection were 'the freshness and originality of the music' and the lack of an important female role.¹

Whatever the reasons for rejection, Mussorgsky enthusiastically began to

¹ Perhaps one should not be too surprised at the rejection of the first completed opera by an unproven composer on the subject of a play which had just failed.

revise the work at once. Is it likely that he would have undertaken so readily the revision of what to him was a satisfactorily completed work without some assurance that the changes would lead to a performance? Indeed, we find an indication of just such an assurance in the memoirs of Lyudmila Shestakova, Glinka's sister. She describes a luncheon she attended on the day *Boris* was rejected. Having asked theatre officials who were present whether the opera had been accepted, she received the reply: 'No, it is impossible for an opera without a female element! Undoubtedly, Mussorgsky has great talent; let him add another scene, then *Boris* would be accepted'.

The history of the revision is quite complex. At first Mussorgsky appears to have intended only to add the Polish scenes, thereby providing the missing 'female element', but by mid-summer of 1871 he had decided on a more extensive revision.¹ In the end, he transferred five of the seven scenes of the initial version (Novodievichy, Coronation, Cell, Inn, Death) – even these with some modifications – directly to the revision. He recomposed a sixth, the scene in the tsar's apartments. He omitted the seventh, the St Basil scene, but stitched a few of its pages (the Simpleton and the children, and his lament) into an entirely new scene, the scene of anarchy in Kromy Forest; and, of course, he added the two Polish scenes. The revision thus contains nine scenes, which the composer finally grouped into a prologue and four acts. Interestingly enough, the idea of placing the newly composed scene near Kromy at the end of the opera, after the death of Boris, was apparently not Mussorgsky's. According to Stasov, 'this so very important change was suggested to the composer by his friend Vladimir Nikolsky [who the reader will recall had sent Mussorgsky to Pushkin's *Boris* in the first place]. Mussorgsky was ecstatic, and in a few days he had redesigned and adjusted this conclusion'.²

The Maryinsky Theatre's music committee examined the revision in the spring of 1872, about six weeks before Mussorgsky completed the orchestration. Writers on the composer usually maintain that the work was rejected a second time at this second examination, but the evidence for this is not convincing. The result of the second examination was probably, on the contrary, provisional acceptance. After all, Mussorgsky was able to bring the committee a completed piano-vocal score answering their previous objections, approval of the censor, and authorization from the tsar himself. He had *not* completed the orchestral score, and so the committee may have been reluctant to guarantee the production of the work in the coming season (1872–73). Furthermore, since they intended to mount both the initial production of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Maid of Pskov* and a revival of Wagner's *Lohengrin* in 1872–73, the committee may have been reluctant to commit themselves to *Boris*, a third major undertaking. Rather, they

¹ According to Vladimir Stasov, Mussorgsky had prepared 'splendid materials' for the scene by the fountain long before the opera's rejection. 'God knows,' Stasov writes, 'why he abandoned them in the first place.'

² Although Mussorgsky may have followed his friends' advice concerning his works more often than most great composers, he was quite capable of resisting when he thought they were wrong. Again, according to Stasov, 'Originally, the opera *Boris Godunov* was to consist of only four acts and was almost completely devoid of a female element. All Mussorgsky's closest friends (including me), who rapturously loved the miracles of drama and folk-truth with which these four acts were filled, nevertheless told him every minute that the opera was not complete, that many essential things were missing in it, and that despite its great beauties, the work could seem at times incomplete. Mussorgsky, like any genuine artist, always persistently defended his work, the fruit of reflections and inspirations. For a long time he did not agree with us and finally yielded to our power only when in the fall of 1870 (sic) the Theatre Directorate refused to mount *Boris* on stage on the grounds that there was a prevalence of choruses and ensembles and a too-sensible absence of scenes for soloists.'

