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MUSORGSKY'S *BORIS GODUNOV*

PROFESSOR MARINA FROLOVA-WALKER

Today we are going to look at what is possibly the most famous of Russian operas – Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. Its route to international celebrity is very clear – the great impresario Serge Diaghilev staged it in Paris in 1908, with the star bass Fyodor Chaliapin in the main role. The opera the Parisians saw would have taken Musorgsky by surprise. First, it was staged in a heavily reworked edition made by Rimsky-Korsakov after Musorgsky's death, where only about 20% of the bars in the original were left unchanged. But that was still a modest affair compared to the steps Diaghilev took on his own initiative. The production had a Russian cast singing the opera in Russian, and Diaghilev was worried that the Parisians would lose patience with scenes that were more wordy, since they would follow none of it, so he decided simply to cut these scenes, even though this meant that some crucial turning points in the drama were lost altogether. He then reordered the remaining scenes to heighten contrasts, jumbling the chronology. In effect, the opera had become a series of striking tableaux rather than a drama with a coherent plot. But as pure spectacle, it was indeed impressive, with astonishing sets provided by the painter Golovin and with the excitement generated by Chaliapin as Boris. For all its shortcomings, it was this production that brought Musorgsky's masterwork to the world's attention.

1908, the year of the Paris production was nearly thirty years after Musorgsky's death, and nearly and forty years after the opera was completed. Yet despite this large time lag, the opera still sounded like a modern piece, and still contained much that composers could learn from, even two generations after Musorgsky. There is also something else that set it apart from many other operas – the dramatic intensity. Although the story had been mangled by Diaghilev, this quality was still very much in evidence (only in the 1930s did Western audiences see the drama in a form that made sense, although composers were able to study the score, of course). And for all those able to appreciate the details of the Russian libretto, it was clear that this was distant from operatic norms, since it stayed as close as possible to its literary original, a tragedy by Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest literary figure. This means that the singers were often given Pushkin's own phrases, which were so resonant and finely honed that they entered common parlance, much as Shakespeare's phrases did in English.

Pushkin had published this blank-verse tragedy in 1830, but surprisingly, it had still not been performed when Musorgsky chose it, although it was widely read. The Russian state considered the historical subject matter too sensitive for the stage, and only lifted the ban in 1868. But if you ever see a stage production of the spoken version, you will discover how difficult it is for the director to stage, and for the audience to follow. It shoots from one place to another and has lots of obscure characters who only appear in one or two scenes. It draws much inspiration from Shakespeare and is even written in Shakespearian iambic pentameters, but it has a much faster pace and an almost modernist avoidance of clear linear narrative. So Musorgsky already had something unique in his hands when he decided to set this play.

But it is worth tracing things back a little further. Pushkin also had a particular source for his drama, which was **The History of the Russian State**, by Nikolai Karamzin. The appearance of this remarkable work in twelve volumes, between 1818 and 1829, was precisely the period when Russia began to define itself as a nation. Just afterwards, as I mentioned last time, Russia acquired another essential item for its nationalist kit, namely, the national anthem of 1833. Like the anthem, the twelve-volume History was a project supported (and funded) by the Court, and unsurprisingly, it gives a favourable account of the Russian autocracy. The History became a best-



seller, and Pushkin was among its admirers, even though his liberalism gave him a rather different political perspective, as he expressed in a wry epigram:

His History's simplicity and grace
Dispassionately prove beyond all doubt
the nation's need of autocratic ways
and for our backs the sweet sting of the lash.

Just as we would expect, then, Pushkin not only draws on chapters of the History for his own *Boris Godunov*, but also engages with it critically in his own polemical commentary. I will give you a little passage, which appears within seconds of the play's beginning. The situation described here is the same as the opera's opening scene, namely, a crowd asking Boris to accept the throne.

SHUISKY.

... How will it end?
That is not hard to tell. A little more
The multitude will groan and wail, Boris
Pucker awhile his forehead, like a toper
Eyeing a glass of wine, and in the end
Will humbly of his graciousness consent
To take the crown; and then—and then will rule us
Just as before...

Shuisky is a high-ranking nobleman, a boyar, and here we hear him speaking about the future tsar in a tone of sarcasm, and even disdain. He speaks of the political theatre behind the glittering surface of the Russian Court, as he probably knows very well, since it seems that he himself is the puppet-master. He shows no respect for the institutions of power, or for Boris himself – for Shuisky, it is all a sham. This is a powerful opening scene that sets Court politics on a Machiavellian footing, preventing the audience from taking all the pomp and circumstance at face value.

Then again, Pushkin's bitter sarcasm is probably not the best fuel to propel a grand opera. So Musorgsky tries to find a middle ground between Pushkin and Karamzin, removing the poet's sharpest barbs without fully acquiescing in the historian's courtly views. But unlike his predecessors, he has music at his command, and uses this to add a depth that cannot be found in the words alone.

So let us see how Musorgsky begins the opera in his orchestral introduction. It starts with just a single voice (a melody played by two bassoons in unison), and if you already know a little about the idioms of 19th-century Russian music, this opening passage should immediately tell you that you are in Russia, not the Caucasus, the East, or some fairytale land, but the real Russia with its rivers, birches, wooden villages and mud. And if you have read a few Russian novels, you may even know the Russian word for the feeling expressed here: *toska*. It is that famous Russian melancholy, Russian sadness, Russian longing for those infinite Russian spaces and the loneliness one feels when lost in them. How can all of this reside in a simple melody? It is because the melody imitates a type of Russian folk song known as the *Protyazhnaya* – a song whose drawn-out melodies create a long verse, which is repeated to form a very long narrative. The subject matter concerns the troubles of an individual rather than the public worlds of religious ritual, labour or recreation. Accordingly, although the song can be performed by a group, it can also be performed by an individual, such as a coachman whiling away a long journey. And as it happens, it was this very folksong genre that was chosen by Russian nationalist intellectuals to represent the melancholy soul of the Russian nation.

But what is that inexplicable force that draws me to thee? Why does thy plaintive song, which rises all over the length and breadth of thee from sea to sea, constantly resound in my ear? What is there in it, in that song? What is there in it that calls, and sobs, and grips the heart? What are those strains that poignantly caress and torment me, that stream straight into my soul, that entwine themselves around my

heart? Russia! What dost thou want of me? (Gogol, *Dead Souls*)



What do we hear next? Another voice joins in, and then another – as if a fugue was going to emerge. But Musorgsky could not have written a fugue to save his life, a shortcoming that did not bother him in the least, since he had never attended a conservatoire, and had a low opinion of them as production lines of composers who would write competent but stodgy Germanic music. Why, then, even hint at a fugue? Partly because this procedure suggests the entry of the other singers after a solo voice has begun the song. And partly because the father-figure of Russian nationalist music, Mikhael Glinka, *did* write fugal and other contrapuntal passages, and even thought that Russian music should go through the same development of techniques as seen in the West over the previous centuries. Although he did not share in this programme, Musorgsky could at least tip his hat in the illustrious Glinka's direction. And so there was a complicated tension between Russian traditional influence and Western art influence, just as Russia itself oscillated between plotting its own course on the one hand, and fretting about falling behind the West on the other. This is what I was hinting at when I said that Musorgsky's music could add depths that couldn't be conjured up by words alone, even by a writer of Pushkin's genius. The orchestral introduction therefore places the story both within centuries-old tradition, but simultaneously in the midst of contemporary worries about Russia's place in the world, all presented in a mood that is decidedly pessimistic.

In the short time that I have today, I would like to do two things above all. I want:

- 1) To show how this opera presents a provocative and pessimistic message about the relationship between autocratic power and the people, which is very unusual for a historical opera;
- 2) To show how Musorgsky broke new ground in developing a Russian national style.

Those of you who attended the inaugural lecture of my series will see how my first point implies that *Boris* is a kind of polar opposite to *A Life for the Tsar*, but the second point will actually show a smooth line of musical development from Glinka to Musorgsky.

So, first of all, a very short potted history. *Boris Godunov* opens in the year 1598, at the start of the Time of Troubles, as it came to be known. The “troubles” in question began when the Rurik dynasty petered out with no heir to the throne, followed by a chaotic interregnum of fifteen years until the first Tsar of the Romanov dynasty was installed. This last event was the subject of the opera in the previous lecture, so we are now taking a step backwards in historical time. The last of the Rurik tsars will be known to you all, at least by name: Ivan the Terrible. His lack of a suitable heir was largely his own fault. In 1581, in a rage, he struck the wife of his son, the Tsarevich Ivan, causing her to miscarry her baby. When the Tsarevich heard of this, he remonstrated with this father, only to be struck dead. Tsar Ivan, who died three years later, had had many other children by his many wives but most of them died in infancy, and the only remaining male after his death was Feodor, whose mild mental retardation left him unfit to rule in his own right. Boris Godunov, coming from a noble boyar family, was a regent up to Fyodor's death in 1598, whereupon he was elected Tsar at an assembly of nobles. Nevertheless, a shadow hangs over him, because some believe that he had ordered the murder of the Tsarevich Dimitry, another of Ivan the Terrible's sons who died at the age of nine in 1591. Strictly speaking, Dimitry was illegitimate because he was born of the seventh marriage, whereas the church had accepted only the first four. But those suspicious of Boris thought that he had murdered the boy anyway, just in case he might (supposedly) get in the way of Boris's ambitions. The story of a miraculous escape from death took hold in the populace, and in the interregnum, there were three or possibly even four claimants to the throne all presenting themselves as Dmitri. The first of these *did* actually ascend to the throne for almost a year, and we will encounter him in the opera, his reign ended when he was murdered by a group of noblemen alarmed at the Catholic influence at Dmitri's court. Shuisky, whose words we saw earlier, then became the Tsar. The other “False Dmitris” also won some popular support, but failed to reach the throne, and all met a bad end.

So, as usual, let us see a synopsis of the opera.



PART I

1598

Scene I

A crowd has been brought to the Novodevichy Convent, to which Boris has retreated. They are instructed by the police to shout out a plea that Boris accept the throne.

Scene II

Boris is crowned in a grand ceremony. He is full of dark premonitions.

PART II

1603

Scene I

In the Chudov Monastery, the monk Pimen is writing his chronicle. He recounts the story of Dimitry's murder to a younger monk, Grigory, who decides to seize the opportunity to become a False Dimitry, revealing his intentions to a confidant before he sets out.

Scene II

At an inn on the border with Lithuania, Grigory is in the company of two vagrant monks who are benign drunkards. He, however, is on a mission to cross the border to raise support for his bid. The police have been informed of Grigory's intentions, and almost apprehend him. First, he tries to deceive them, but when they remain unconvinced, he jumps out of the window and makes a successful escape.

PART III

Boris is at home in the Kremlin with his family. He is shown as a loving father to his son and daughter, but also as a troubled monarch. Shuisky delivers the news of "Dimitry", and Boris is filled with fear.

PART IV

Scene I

Near St Basil's Cathedral in the Kremlin, a crowd of starving peasants discusses the case of the Dmitri as they wait for Boris to come out. The Holy Fool is harassed by a crowd of children. When Boris comes out, he asks The Holy Fool to pray for him, but The Holy Fool refuses, accusing Boris of infanticide. Boris is horrified.

Scene II

In the Kremlin's council room, the boyars pass a death sentence on Dmitri. Shuisky arrives to tell them of Boris's tormented mental state, and Boris indeed appears disheveled and disoriented. Shuisky brings in Pimen, who tells the story of a miracle on Dimitry's grave. Boris breaks down. He says farewell to his son and dies.

Now, those of you who have seen a production of *Boris* might well say at this point: this is not right, that's not how it ends, she's forgotten about the last scene. In a sense, you will be right. But in a sense, I am also right. How so? The apparent contradiction arises because what I've just summarised is the original version of *Boris*, completed in 1869. It is not just a matter for discussion among musicologists either, because it *is* performed from time to time. Still, it is not what will come to mind for most of the operatic public.

Let us stay with this version for longer, since there is more to be said about it. In this version, of 1869, Musorgsky stays closest to Pushkin's text. But because opera generally proceeds much slower than spoken drama, some of the material has to go, if *Boris* the opera is to remain at a performable length. Musorgsky chose to demote the Pretender (False Dmitry 1) in importance, removing most of his scenes, including his time at the Polish-Lithuanian court, and various battle scenes. The 1869 version also brings the story to a close much earlier than Pushkin. The stage play ends with the tragic suicide (or possibly murder) of Boris's children, while the Pretender is hailed as the new Tsar by the boyars, who have switched to his side for personal gain. The people, in response, remain silent. This, indeed is the famous stage direction at the end of Pushkin's text: Народ безмолвствует. – The people are mute.



Musorgsky decided to keep the opera (in the 1869 version) focused on the character of Boris. The resulting work is primarily a tragedy of a ruler whose past misdeeds lie heavily on his conscience, gradually undermining his hold on power, and in the end, undoing him completely. Musorgsky ends the opera with the death of Boris, which he turns into a public spectacle, whereas Pushkin places the death off-stage. Now if there is one thing that composers of operatic tragedy like to do, it is writing elaborate death scenes, and Musorgsky was hardly going to pass up his chance just for the sake of following Pushkin, who, after all, was working in a different, if related, art-form. And he certainly made a success of it. If you saw a production of *Boris* some years ago, and only one scene still lingers in your memory at this stage, it is sure to be the death scene. Chaliapin, the great bass who did so much to make the opera internationally famous, has exerted his influence on other performers of the title role, through to the present day. As the life ebbs from his character, he allows his singing voice to falter, turning almost to speech. Even though this has become the norm, we know that it runs counter to Musorgsky's intentions, since he had gone to great lengths to produce a kind of musicalized speech, trying to map the intonational pattern of spoken delivery onto his melodic lines. This was, in fact, one of his major contributions to music – inventing a new type of recitative that eschewed operatic convention for a more realistic representation of human speech. Even though this is bound to result in capricious rhythms and unusual sequences of pitches (and a decided lack of tunefulness), Musorgsky bit on the bullet – the result, he thought, was worth the sacrifice in conventional musicality.

His first experiment in this kind of operatic writing was his opera *The Marriage*, based on a comedy by Gogol. The work as he left it was substantial, but still incomplete. He wanted to follow Gogol's comedy word-for-word, and not only sought to match his melodic lines to a typical actor's intonation, but also even tried to bring the vocal lines up to the speed of normal spoken delivery and speed of delivery in music. The result is indeed amusing at first, but over time, the effect is confusing, as even Musorgsky's closest friends told him: whatever he had produced, it did not seem to fit in the category of music – it was simply too remote from any known standards of melody, harmony and rhythm. Accepting that he had gone too far, and created an opera that would be indigestible even for the most sympathetic of listeners, he broke off work on *The Marriage*, and turned instead to *Boris*.

He now made a strategic retreat into territory that was more recognisably musical, especially in the area of harmonic progressions, in order to salvage all the best aspects of his project to bring opera close to realistic human speech patterns. In some respects, he even developed the approach further than in *The Marriage*, but in a way that could be appreciated and enjoyed by the public. Accordingly, the characters speak very differently from each other: women sound quite unlike men, the drunk are distinguished from the sober, Boris becomes overexcited beyond the bounds of musical propriety, while by contrast, Shuisky the evil puppeteer keeps a cool head and is given appropriately smooth music. It might seem too obvious to be worth mentioning, but they *do* have one thing in common, which is that they are all singing in Russian. This is actually significant, because Russian has a number of distinctive features that strongly affect any musical setting. To take on striking feature, the stressed syllable in a word can be followed by several unaccented syllables, which puts it at the opposite end of the spectrum from Italian, the original and central language of opera, whose norm is to place the stress on the penultimate syllable. So when the music is so carefully tied up with the Russian language as in *Boris*, we must ask if a translation is even possible without obliterating much of Musorgsky's artistic intention and hard effort. Yes, translation might allow the audience to appreciate the twists and turns of the drama with greater immediacy, but surtitles can also do this without damage to Musorgsky's carefully calculated vocal lines.

I will show you a few more examples of this; to follow every detail, you would need a command of Russian, but failing that, I will ensure that you can still benefit from a more broad-brush picture. The experience Musorgsky gained from *The Marriage* is particularly evident when he turned to comedy in *Boris*, such as the scene at an inn located on the Lithuanian border. It is one thing to set a comic text to music so that the audience detects the comic mood, and quite another to elicit spontaneous laughter from the audience.

This novel use of musicalized speech inflections also spreads to the choir. In the Prologue, when the people are told make tearful pleas to Boris that he should accept the throne, they do exactly that in a mournful chorus, but they also pause and discuss matters amongst themselves, and it becomes clear that some of them have no idea why they are here in the first place. Musorgsky's friends imagined that this was another comedy device, but this



was not the composer's intention: he wanted to unpick the convention of the monolithic chorus united in a single will, again for the sake of dramatic realism.

This plays an important role in shaping our conception of the opera. Boris is trying to govern the people, Shuisky to manipulate them, and the Pretender to win them over to his side, but the people themselves, for Musorgsky, are not an undifferentiated mass and their ideas can change. They talk among themselves, rumours spread, and dissent can easily take root and grow. In his long soliloquy, Boris complains about the ingratitude of the people and how it is impossible to win their love. He had done much to help the people, but a few years of drought wiped out all the benefits, and they put the blame for the ensuing famine, even though he had done his best to alleviate the effects. And so they were now looking for a new tsar.

In the original version of 1869, the people eventually acquire a spokesman to challenge Boris: this is the character known as the Holy Fool. He comes to the fore in an exceptionally powerful scene where, as the lowliest and most despised of all, he is able to speak truth to power – this is a special right that Russian culture accords to Holy Fools, which they earn by denying themselves even the most basic of comforts, placing themselves outside the social hierarchy. We will see the extraordinary performance of Ivan Kozlovsky from the 1954 Soviet film – he was the singer to make this role his own and to boost its significance further.

But when Musorgsky reworked the opera in 1872, he dropped this scene. The revision was a matter of necessity, since the first version had been rejected by the Imperial Theatres (the Bolshoi in Moscow and the Mariinsky in St Petersburg). Although the Imperial Theatres were certainly not averse to political censorship, this was not the issue when the original version of *Boris* was submitted. As far as they were concerned, the opera lacked sufficient public appeal, and this was due to the plain and entirely non-political fact that there was no prima donna role. Musorgsky's fascination with history's dark corners had led him to overlook one of opera's essentials: a love story. There were smaller, privately owned opera houses established towards the end of the century, but at this point, the Imperial Theatres were the only operatic venues available. As it happens, the addition of love interest did no violence to the artistic conception, since it was already present in Pushkin's story, and this, in turn, had a basis in historical fact. Musorgsky, as we saw, had demoted the Pretender, and with him the love story, mainly in order to stop Pushkin's story from becoming hopelessly sprawling on the operatic stage. The love interest for the Pretender was the Polish princess, Marina Mniszek, and her restoration to the story actually made it easier to convey the political intrigue around the Pretender. Marina had a driving ambition to become the Russian Tsarina, she represented Polish interests in Russia, and Catholic interests in an Orthodox land. As Tsarina, she was perfectly placed to foist her alien ways on the Russians – a perfect villain for any 19th-century artist with Russian nationalist ideas. Good, thought Musorgsky, and wrote another act to absorb all of this.

But we will leave aside our Polish princess for the moment to look at the rest of the revision process, because although it was motivated by pragmatic reasons, Musorgsky soon saw other possibilities once he got started. Here we return to the earlier puzzle of the ending – I had said the opera ends with the death of Boris, whereas most of you who have attended a production the opera would have scene another half-hour's worth of memorable drama. So Musorgsky did indeed add a new ending, and this owed nothing to Pushkin, nor even to Karamzin's history. Musorgsky, as it happens, had also taken advantage of a more recent account of the period, in the writings of the historian Nikolai Kostomarov. This inspired him to add the new ending about the aftermath of Boris's death, featuring a popular revolt at the edge of the Kromy Forest. This is not a mere afterthought, but flows with good dramatic logic from all the debate and grumbling that could be heard from members of the crowd in earlier scenes, even when they were submitting to the cudgel-wielding police. With the death of Boris, the crowd gains sufficient confidence to turn to mockery of the headless authorities, and then to become violent. It is a state of carnivalesque but terrifying lawlessness, which only abates when the Pretender decides that is an opportunity he must take, however risky it may be, and rides into the midst of the crowd on his fine horse. Perhaps this is the new leader who will save the day and meet the needs of the people. Perhaps, but we notice that the Dimitry leitmotif has been transformed into a Polonaise, telling us that Dimitry is now, in effect, just an agent for Polish interests. Some welcome him, but others are bewildered by his entourage, which includes Jesuits, and Musorgsky increases suspicion by giving them Gregorian chant (which sounds quite unlike the Orthodox chant that was known to his



first audiences). Then all goes quiet, and the Holy Fool moves to the front of the stage, sings us out with his wailing little tune, prophesying dark times for Russia.

Pushkin had also extended the drama beyond the death of Boris, but not in this manner: in his play, Boris's heir, together with his brothers and sisters, is murdered, and the crowd receives the news in shocked silence – there will be no Godunov dynasty. Musorgsky bypasses this, and takes us to the next stage of the historical events. In so doing, he manages to bring about a kind of symbolic closure, the Holy Fool's lament balancing the melancholy folksong we hear at the opening of the opera. But on the musical level, there is an unprecedented denial of closure: The Holy Fool's tune dies into nothing, without even a perfunctory key chord to signal the end of what is, after all, one of the heaviest operas in the repertoire. Instead, it ends with a non-musical gesture, a sob or a sigh.

Musorgsky was soon visited by doubts about the new final scene, worrying that his portrayal of the Russian people was too cynical – and well might he be concerned, since this was the era of “populism” among the intelligentsia, when much thought was given to the plight of the lower classes. But he was not about to launch into a further phase of rewriting, and he let the 1872 version end as it stood. Shockingly, the centrepiece of the original version, the scene at St Basil's Cathedral, is dropped completely. Lest we imagine that this was some strange form of artistic masochism, Musorgsky actually had little choice once he had written the new final scene, because there he gives the Holy Fool the same music that he had once sung to Boris outside St Basil's. Musorgsky's realist aesthetics excluded any use of large-scale repetition, so the old scene had to go, no matter how powerful it might have been. Let us now take a further look at how Musorgsky created that special Russian sound for *Boris* – each page seems immediately identifiable as Russian, even when the opera is sung in another language. We have already discussed the use of folk-like material and the innovative use of recitative based on Russian speech patterns. So we have one source in folksong, another in speech, but there is a third, and that is the music of the Russian Orthodox church. Every time God is mentioned, every time there is some reference to prayer or the Orthodox Patriarch, or even to the sanctity of the Tsar's rule, Musorgsky gives us a harmonic progression that is drawn from the most familiar part of the Orthodox liturgy. Occasionally, as in the monks' chants, it is purposefully made more archaic and thus exoticised, but most of the time, the church and the sacred are represented by simple progressions that were very well known to his Russian audience. If you have never heard a Russian Orthodox service, you will not make anything of this reference, because they will seem too straightforward and Western sounding to be picked up on the radar. But for all those who have heard the Orthodox liturgy, perhaps just once as a visitor, or in a documentary film, you will recognise these references in the score, however fleeting they are.

But far more prominent for the non-Russian listener is the evocation of Orthodox bell-ringing. If you were at my last lecture you will remember that Glinka used Orthodox bells for his final scene of celebration. And here, too, we first encounter them in the Coronation Scene of the Prologue. But for Musorgsky, merely adding a battery of church bells to the score as a kind of bonus for the listener was just not good enough. Instead, he wanted to write the bells into the score, into the very orchestral texture. Hiring a few bells and bell ringers could be carried out by any competent theatre management; but to evoke the sound of the bells by other means required imagination and ingenuity from the composer. Musorgsky's insistence on the second approach also provides us with a perfect example of how musical nationalism went hand-in-hand with musical innovation, and not just the innovation of isolated stunts, but innovation that opened up a rich new artistic vista to be explored further by future composers. The motivation was to do something very Russian, in a way that would fascinate the audience more than simply importing the real thing. To do this persuasively required innovations in harmony and orchestration that were exciting in themselves. Once this had been successfully executed, it would inspire other composers to absorb and develop the device further, and to use it as a general marker of Russianness, even in non-operatic music that had no dramatic need to suggest Russian bells. And this is exactly what happened with Musorgsky's bell music – in the next generation, Rachmaninov in particular was endlessly inventive in creating bell-like textures.

Unlike Western church bells, the Russian Orthodox set includes very small bells that can be co-ordinated with greater precision, but there are also huge bells (as in the West) whose pitch is not clearly defined because they have a very complex timbre with what acousticians call “non-harmonic frequencies”. Musorgsky had to find an artful counterpart to this feature, and decided to represent this “out-of-tuneness” with the interval of a tritone, building two chords on that tritone that keep alternating. In tonal music, these chords would not normally be



found next to each other, and on the odd occasion when they were, the second chord would resolve onto a third, more stable chord. But if a composer simply alternates between the two, tonality itself is suspended – there is no sense of a key any more – and the result is quite magical for the audience, which is largely unaware of the means. But the orchestration also had to be carefully calculated, and Musorgsky was fortunate in having one of the world's leading authorities on orchestration at hand, namely, his friend and colleague Rimsky-Korsakov. Let us hear how it turned out.

But I have withheld some information up to now. Not only did Musorgsky create bell sounds through innovations in harmony and orchestration, but on top of that, he *did* actually include real bells too. After all that I have just said, you might well ask why he bothered – why did he not just hire the bells and have done with it? A good question, but there *is* a convincing answer. The orchestra imitates specifically the bells of the great Kremlin bell tower known as the Great Ivan. These bells are close to the audience in the sense that they come from the orchestra pit, but also close to the characters on stage, since they are situated in the Kremlin, like the bell tower. The opera's real bells, conversely, are far away in the same two senses: for the audience, they are offstage, and for the stage characters, they are on the other side of the River Moskva. True, these subtleties can only be appreciated to the full by listeners who are well acquainted with the soundscape of central Moscow, but for any listener, the combined effect of the two kinds of bell sound is undeniably stunning.

So the coronation-bells passage is delightful in itself, while it is, at the same time, a statement of musical nationalism, and also represents the innovatory outlook cultivated by the Russian nationalist. But this still does not exhaust the significance of the bells, since they have a symbolic meaning within the opera, and echo down through the later scenes, where their meaning is transformed. When re-writing the scene of Boris in his Kremlin rooms, Musorgsky added an episode that I played to you at the very start (with Chaliapin in the role of Boris). Tormented by his conscience, he sees a ghostly apparition of the murdered boy Dimitry. This is accompanied by the chiming of the clock, which was earlier introduced as a benign and lovely modern thing, a sign of progress. But the chiming outlines the same interval of the tritone that we heard in the coronation bells, and this tritone unsettles the tonality even more than had done previously. There it was a device serving artistic realism; here, it is a breakdown in tonality representing Boris's disintegrating mind.

We also hear the funereal tolling of the large bell before Boris dies. When he realizes that he is going to die, he requests the last rites and we hear the bell and the chanting of monks. And we wonder for a moment how this is all happening so quickly? Was Shuisky at the ready to stage this frightening soundtrack in order to speed up Boris's demise? One way or another, the fateful bells become a symbol of Boris's illegitimate, wrongful rule.

The bells then became hugely important in Russian music, and this scene remained a perennial reference point. Rachmaninov, in particular, owes a debt to Musorgsky, as I mentioned earlier, but so do Scriabin and Prokofiev. The Boris bells became a leading idiom in the vocabulary of Russian nationalist music.

I have shown how Musorgsky cultivated a recognisably Russian sound in various ways. But in parts of the opera, he eschews this approach, and tries to sound Western instead. This is not a careless lapse, but a contrasting portrayal of the Polish court, which occurs in Act III of the 1872 version. This shows that in opera at least, the Russian style cannot simply become a default style. But leaving aside questions of aesthetics and nationalist politics, the switch to a Western style allows Musorgsky to demonstrate that he is perfectly capable of writing a conventionally beautiful love duet for Marina and the Pretender.

But for the most part, Musorgsky actively avoids the forms and patterns of normal European opera. While it was an aim in its own right, this lack of standard forms was bound to follow from the self-imposed task of following Pushkin's text. It also left Musorgsky free to control the pace of the drama, without the need for static contemplative moments and repetitions of both music and text demanded by arias and ensembles. The 1869 version is stricter in its adherence to this aesthetic, inherited from the unfinished opera, *The Marriage*, as we saw earlier. In the 1872 version, the addition of the Polish act, which needed to sound Western, pulled Musorgsky in a different direction, but this more conventional approach also seeped into the revisions to the existing scenes, and he actually added solo numbers, most of them folk-song based, and rewrote Boris's central soliloquy, so that



it sounds more like an aria, with a memorable melody and even some literal repetition (the melody itself was taken from his earlier discarded opera *Salammbô*). So we see Musorgsky working his way through a period of intense experimentation, after which he is “mugged by reality” twice: first, by his musical friends, who found *The Marriage* so extreme that it was no longer music, but a kind of drama with pitches, and then a second time, when the Imperial Theatres rejected the 1869 *Boris*, and he realised that he would have to take further steps back towards traditional opera if he ever wanted *Boris* to reach the stage.

The very word “nationalism”, and all the foregoing discussion of Musorgsky’s avoidance of Western idioms might easily mislead the unwary into thinking that *Boris* is a glorification of the Russian state and nation as we find in Glinka’s *Life for the Tsar* in my previous lecture. And yet, as we have seen at many points, *Boris* is quite the opposite, showing the institution of the monarchy thrown into doubt, while the Russian people, far from rushing to sacrifice their lives in its defence, lie on a spectrum from sullen subservience, through indifference and impotent complaining through to open rebellion.

You could be forgiven for thinking that *Boris* would have encountered political problems, both on its way to the stage, and in holding its place in the repertoire. Now, it was indeed threatened by problems at various times, but they were not quite the result of straightforward political censure. Firstly, *Boris* was not a tsar of the ruling Romanov dynasty, so his portrayal on stage was not regarded as a sensitive matter by the state censor. The initial problem was, rather, that Orthodox clergy could not be represented on stage. This immediately ruled out the monastery scene, and there could not be any clergy in the Coronation scene. The revolutionary unrest at Kromy, which one might have thought too incendiary for the censor, was actually passed for the Imperial Theatre production of 1874 at the Mariinsky in St Petersburg. Nevertheless, there was a rumour that the opera was not favoured by the royal family, and it was taken off in 1882, after Alexander III’s accession to the throne. Musorgsky did not live to see this, since he had met his early death the previous year, at the age of 42.

Fortunately, there was one well-placed individual who fought to bring the opera back onto the stage. This was Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky’s colleague and even his collaborator in the orchestration of the bell sounds of the Coronation scene. But while Rimsky-Korsakov did not doubt Musorgsky’s genius in creating *Boris*, he thought that his late colleague was rather a rough diamond as a composer. The score was crying out for someone like Rimsky-Korsakov to polish it into perfection, so that Musorgsky’s great ideas could be presented with clarity and brilliance, so that they could be appreciated fully. This entailed copious editing and re-orchestrating of the score, resulting in a version that did indeed become very popular and which has remained in continuous use in some Russian theatres up to the present day, including, I believe, the Bolshoi. But by the time Diaghilev staged this version (severely cut, as I have said) in Paris, there were many voices raised in complaint that Musorgsky’s own voice should be respected, and that Rimsky-Korsakov’s version was not an improvement, but prettified and conventionalized the original. Debussy was one of these protestors, because Musorgsky was one of the few influences he was prepared to acknowledge, and he admired precisely the wildness of his harmonies and voice-leading, which suddenly started to make better sense in the era of early modernism (Rimsky-Korsakov was also undoubtedly one of his influences, but he preferred not to talk about this). While Rimsky-Korsakov had died before the controversy heated up, he had heard milder complaints a few years earlier, to which he replied: “It’s not as if I burnt the old *Boris*”. And indeed, there was nothing to stop anyone with the desire and means from staging Musorgsky’s original which is what first happened in 1928 in Petrograd (whether it was the 1872 version, the 1869 or a composite is a separate issue).

Again, one might expect that *Boris Godunov* would be too provocative to stage during the Soviet times – an autocratic ruler who had blood on his hands and lacked legitimacy. And yet it became one of the great favourites of the Soviet stage. The popular revolt in the final Kromy Forest riot scene allowed Soviet musicologists to extol Musorgsky as a kind of proto-revolutionary composer. There was just one moment where they felt they had to change a few lines of text, to ensure that the crowd did not come across as too unpatriotic and too eager to welcome a foreign army. They were also reluctant to allow the drunken former monks Varlaam and Misail to be seen as the leaders of the rebellion, so they gave these new lines to characters from the Prologue. But apart from these tiny adjustments, *Boris* was deemed worthy for the edification of Soviet audiences, even at the height of Stalin’s rule.



So if you were to attend a random production of *Boris* today, there is no way I could predict which version you were going to see. It could be the 1869 version, darker, sparser, and more ascetic, which responds well to modern-dress stagings with references to, say, the Russian 1990s. Or it might be the 1872 version which has more entertainment and spectacle in it, including a ballet at the Polish court. Then again, it might be a composite version that would include both the St Basil scene and the Kromy scene, even though this means that the Holy Fool effectively plays out his dramatic role twice. Or perhaps you will see the Rimsky-Korsakov version, which will provide you with a luxuriant score more exciting vocal parts. It might even be the Shostakovich orchestration, which is darker than Rimsky-Korsakov's, but still fuller than the Musorgsky's. Despite these differences, the gripping dramatic core of the opera and its provocative messages are likely to survive. And this is why it has remained the best-known Russian opera the world over ever since it was played in Paris in 1908.

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