

BORIS GODUNOV
MODEST MUSSORGSKY

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OPERA GUILD OF ROCHESTER

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BORIS GODUNOV

by Modest Mussorgsky

- In September 1580 there was a double wedding in Moscow. Tsar Ivan IV, known as “Ivan the Terrible”, married his seventh and last wife Maria Nagaya, and his younger son Feodor Ivanovich married Irina, the younger daughter of Boris Godunov.
- Among the congregation of this glorious celebration were Boris Godunov and Vasili Shuisky. I make the point that these four gentlemen were all Tsars of Russia; Ivan IV (1533-1584), Feodor I (1584-1598), Boris Godunov (1598-1605) and Vasili IV (1606-1610)
- Maria Nagaya gave birth to a son, Dmitri Ivanovich on October 19, 1582. When Ivan IV died in 1584, Feodor Ivanovich became Tsar, but there was a problem.
- Feodor was a dreamer and, by consensus, ‘feeble minded’. The government boyars therefore decided to appoint a Regent and after some lengthy discussions, chose Boris Godunov, who was given the authority to run the country in partnership with Feodor.

- These boyars, some of whom didn’t vote for Boris, were positioning themselves to obtain the Tzardom after the death of Feodor. One of them was Vasili Shusiky, who you will see portrayed in the opera. It’s a bit like our ongoing tussle for the Republican nomination.
- Of course, Boris, since he was Feodor’s uncle, was also interested in becoming the next Tsar. Therefore, Boris, being prudent, sent Maria Nagaya and her young son Dmitri Ivanovich to a small town of Uglich, about 120 miles north of Moscow.
- It was the early morning of March 15, 1591 when all this political upheaval in Moscow exploded! Dmitri Ivanovich, age 9, was killed in Uglich, setting off a deluge of conspiracy theories, chief of which was that Boris instigated the murder of the child. Partly to deflect these malicious rumors, Boris sent Vasili Shuisky, one of the boyars who opposed him, to Uglich in order to determine the truth and report back.

- Shuisky returned and produced an official report saying that the child died, according to eye witnesses, by a self-inflicted knife wound as he suffered an epileptic seizure. This report is still in the Kremlin archives. 140 people were interviewed during this investigation and many of the accounts differed significantly from that stated in the report.
- When Feodor Ivanovich died in 1598, the 700 year old Ruric Dynasty of Russia, also died, resulting in what now is called the "Times of Troubles".
- Boris Godunov had shown that he could lead the country, since he had been Regent for seven years, and the Parliament in Moscow chose him, after more lengthy discussions to be the next Tsar.
- However, with the increasing speculation that he was in some way responsible for the death of Dmitri Ivanovich in Uglich, Boris was unsure.

- Nevertheless, Boris Feodorovich Godunov was crowned Tsar of all Russia in Moscow on September 1, 1598. Boris began his reign with apparent popular approval and continued the wise and firm rule which he had shown during Feodor's nominal authority.
- However, a national disaster occurred when the whole land was struck by a severe famine in the years 1601-1603.
- Although Boris did his best to alleviate the famine by distributing grain to the hungry and giving employment to the needy, he did not have sufficient resources to feed all, or enough public works to support the great number of jobless, and the situation gradually assumed the proportion of a real catastrophe.

- According to the contemporary Russian historian, “hordes of famine-stricken people as well as bandits wandered all over the country, plundering, burning, and killing. Famine and highway robbery, were “the beginning of the calamity” for Russia.”
- It was in 1603 that rumors first began to be circulated about the miraculous survival of Tsarevich Dmitri. According to one, Boris had indeed attempted to have the child assassinated by his agents in Uglich, but they murdered the wrong child. The real Dmitri was in hiding and would eventually come to claim his throne. Boris strongly suspected boyar complicity in circulating these stories, but proceeded carefully.
- The stories were not entirely unfounded. Indeed, a young man claiming to be Dmitri had appeared in Poland some months earlier and had attracted a sizable following. Boris, weary and depressed from combating the famine, was alarmed by this development and fell into doubt. In the spring of 1604, he summoned Maria Nagaya from her convent to question her about her son's death.

- Her ambiguous testimony, however, was not reassuring. He subsequently interrogated Vasily Shuisky, who had headed the investigation of Dmitri's death in 1591. The prince stated categorically that the child had died and was buried. If this were true, however, who was this other Dmitri in Poland?
- Boris sent his brother, Semen Godunov, and the security police to investigate the matter. They identified the man as Grigori Otrepiev, who had been a monk at Chudov Monastery located in the Moscow Kremlin.
- Grigori's highly developed literary skills and quick mind soon impressed his superiors, and he was offered a position assisting the patriarch. This supposedly allowed him to learn details about the Tsarevich and the Uglich tragedy. Armed with this information, and inspired by a plan, he eventually made his way to an estate in what was then eastern Poland, where he convinced several people that he was Dmitri Ivanovich, heir to the Russian throne and would someday return to Moscow and rule according to his God-given right

- Within a year he had convinced the Polish government to support him. Thus, it was on October 14, 1604 that this False Dmitri's army crossed the Russian border and headed towards Moscow. There were several skirmishes throughout 1604, but Dmitri never reached Moscow.
- By the spring of 1605, Dmitri's prospects were clearly on the wane and might have been extinguished altogether if Shuisky had not decided to take vengeance on the residents of the Komaritsky district in Ukraine, where support for the tsarevich had been particularly strong.
- There, men, women, and children were cruelly put to death in great numbers; some were hung by their feet in trees and shot. Such savagery was frighteningly reminiscent of the worst excesses of Ivan the Terrible and served only to solidify hatred for the Godunov regime.

- Indeed, Boris himself seemed to sense this hatred, and despite his improved military situation, he became depressed, isolated, and increasingly detached from affairs of state. He consulted soothsayers and holy people in a desperate attempt to find spiritual peace. He was also in bad health, although it was not thought to have been serious until the evening of April 13.
- On that occasion, Boris ate a large meal and suddenly became deathly ill. His doctors were summoned, but they were powerless to help him. Just before expiring, his entire body began to tremble as blood streamed from his mouth, ears and nose.
- To the False Dmitri, now known as the Pretender, and those who supported him, Boris' sudden death must have seemed like a miracle. As new supporters flocked to his cause, Dmitri remained in Putivl and reorganized his forces against an enemy that no longer seemed formidable.

- The new Tsar Feodor I, just sixteen when the throne passed to him, was overwhelmed by the hostility and chaos he had inherited. He had hoped to rely on Piotr Basmanov, a loyal Boris friend and supporter, to defend the regime, but when the latter declared for Dmitri on April 27, all was lost.
- Tsar Feodor and his mother Maria were killed on June 10. Feodor's sister Xenia was spared and sent to a convent.
- The Pretender was crowned Tsar Dmitri Ivanovich on July 21, 1605 in the Cathedral of the Assumption in Moscow and proceeded to rule.
- He ruled for less than a year and was killed on May 17, 1606
- Prince Vasili Ivanovich Shuisky was crowned Tsar Vasili IV two days later. He reigned four years, was deposed and died in prison, 1612.

- 220 years later, Alexander Pushkin wrote a play about this Russian history, in 23 published scenes. It was written in 1825, published in 1831, but not approved for performance by the censor until 1866. The first performance took place on September 17, 1870 at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg.
- Modest Mussorgsky used this play as the basis for his opera, Boris Godunov, using most of the characters and parts of eight of the 23 scenes. The opera was composed between 1868 and 1873
- However, he made big changes in Pushkin's interpretation of the Uglich affair. Unlike the historical accounts or Pushkin's own interpretation, Mussorgsky added a different view of the death of the 9 year old Tsarevich Dmitri in Uglich as well as the events leading up to the death of Boris.
- He extends the story of Pimen, who now tells Grigory (the future False Dmitri) that he witnessed the resurrection of Dmitri 13 days after the murder.
- Mussorgsky uses this to 'juice up' the events leading up to the death of Boris, which is brought about by Pimen's re-telling the resurrection story directly to him.

- Mussorgsky finished his first version of Boris Godunov in 1869 and submitted it to the Music Committee of the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg. The committee rejected it by a vote of 6 to 1, since it had no 'female element'.
- Mussorgsky then began a revision, adding the Polish scenes, with Marina Mniszek, as the 'female element', plus several changes to the order and content of the other scenes.
- In 1872 he submitted the revised opera to the Music Committee, who accepted it provisionally for some later performance, which turned out to be January 27, 1874.
- Thus we have two versions of Boris, which have been 'modified' in later years by others, including Nikolay Rimski-Korsakov and Dmitri Shostakovich.
- However, today I'm talking about the original 1869 version, the most authentic Mussorgsky edition, in four Parts, without the Polish scenes.

- *Part I, Scene 1: The Novodevichy Monastery.*
- The curtain rises to reveal a crowd of Russian commoners milling about in front of the main gate. A policeman appears, cudgel in hand, and orders the crowd to kneel and beg the boyar Boris Godunov to become their tsar. It is 1598.
- Under the watchful eye of the policeman, members of the crowd discuss the situation, revealing that they have no clear idea why they are made to stand about, howling on demand. In the midst of their deliberations, the policeman returns, ordering them to resume their supplications, which they do with redoubled effort.
- The policeman announces the entry of Shchelkalov, clerk of the Duma, who informs the assembled crowd that Boris steadfastly refuses to accept the crown.
- Forseeing only misery for Russia unless Boris can be made to change his mind, Shchelkalov urges the people to pray to God to "send heavenly wisdom to strengthen Boris's weary soul"

- *Part I, Scene 2: Coronation.*
- Perhaps the best known scene in the opera, the Coronation scene introduces the title character at the height of his glory. It presents the most opulent stage picture, common people, nobles, princes, and the Tsar himself in a tableau, the effect of which, according to Diaghilev, would be compromised by fewer than 300 people on stage.
- This festive scene begins with one of the most beloved moments in all opera: a striking depiction of the bells of Moscow ringing in celebration of the Tsar's coronation.
- In this first video clip I have chosen Rene Pape, from the 2010 MET performance, with the beautiful signing from the MET chorus.
- In Steven Wadsworth's staging, notice how the lights are lowered when Boris reveals his anguish and guilt over being accused by many for the murder of Tsarevitch Dmitri Ivanovich in 1591.
- **Video Clip 1**

- *Part II, Scene 1: Cell in the Chudov Monastery.*
- Father Pimen sits and writes in front of an icon lamp. Five years have passed since the events of *Part I*; the year now is 1603.
- Pimen, an aged monk and chronicler, is writing by lamplight in his cell in the Chudov Monastery inside the Kremlin. The young novice Grigory Otrepiev - whom we later shall know as the Pretender (or False Dmitry) - is asleep on a pad in the cell.
- Pimen is preparing a chronicle of events that have unfolded during his lifetime. He anticipates the day, far in the future, when an industrious monk will find and transcribe his record, so that "the descendants of the orthodox may learn the ancient fate of their native land."
- Grigory awakens and Pimen counsels him to subdue his youthful blood with fasting and prayer, admitting that even as an old man he is subject to evil dreams of wanton feasts if he should fall asleep without saying his prayers.

- Pimen narrates in detail how the Tsarevich was murdered; Grigory then asks Pimen how old the murdered Tsarevich Dmitry would be had he lived. Pimen responds, "He would be your age, and the reigning Tsar," whereupon an idea is born in Grigory's brain.
- Failing to notice the change that has come upon Grigory, the old monk indicates that he will conclude his chronicle with an account of Boris's crime and exhorts Grigory to continue the work. A bell sounds matins, the chorus of monks is heard offstage again, and Pimen exits.
- The second Video clip is taken from Andrzej Zulawski's controversial film made in 1989, just released in Europe last year by Gaumont France.
- In 1987 Erato Records commissioned Mstislav Rostropovitch and the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC to produce and record the complete Boris Godunov opera from the revised David Lloyd-Jones edition, which combines and rearranges the 1869 and 1874 performances by Modest Mussorgsky.

- A concert performance of "Boris Godunov" took place on July 6, 1987 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The nearly five-hour event had its failings and eccentricities, but, over all, it amounted to an overwhelming statement of Mussorgsky's masterpiece.
- The audio recording was released in 1991 and received good reviews. The cast included Ruggero Raimondi as Boris, Galina Vishnevskaya as Marina, Paul Plishka as Pimen and Kenneth Riegel as Shuisky.
- In this video clip of the 1989 film, Pimen is played by Bernard Lefort (sung by Paul Plishka) and Grigory is played by Pavel Slaby (sung by Wyatcheslaw Polozov)
- **Video Clip 2**

- *Part II, Scene 2: Inn on the Lithuanian Frontier*
- The curtain rises to reveal the hostess of the inn, who sings a bawdy animal ditty in folk style. Varlaam and Misail, two vagabond monks enter in the company of Grigory, who has escaped from the monastery intending to make his way to Poland-Lithuania and there to establish himself as a miraculously resurrected Dmitri.
- There is much drinking and cavorting. Grigory begins to question the hostess about the road to the border. She tells him that the police are patrolling the road, seeking a runaway from Moscow.
- A pair of border guards enters the inn. The two policemen have a warrant for Grigory's arrest. Varlaam and Misail, when questioned, state that they are itinerant monks
- Grigory identifies himself as a peasant from the neighboring village, who has been guiding the old monks to the border. This raises the policeman's suspicions, and he begins to question Varlaam, who laments the sad state of Christian charity and denies knowing anything about this Grigory Otripev whom the police are seeking.

- Since the policemen are illiterate, Grigory steps forward to read it for them. Altering the warrant by improvising a description of Varlaam, he convinces them that Varlaam is their man.
- But the police have interpreted the warrant as an order not just to seize Grigory, but to seize and hang him. Sensing a trick, Varlaam acknowledges that, well, perhaps he can read after all if they will give him time to spell out the letters, particularly since the affair has become a hanging matter
- He grabs the warrant and begins to sound the words out syllable by syllable. At length, it dawns on all parties that Grigory is in fact the runaway.
- Amid general confusion, Grigory pulls a knife and escapes through the window while the others, in vaudeville disarray, try to catch him.

- *Part III: The Terem in the Kremlin*
- Act II is set in the Terem, the family quarters in the palace. The Tsarevna Xenia, Boris's daughter, sings a lamentation for her recently deceased betrothed, while her brother Feodor silently studies a map. Feodor next tries to cheer up his sister by drawing her attention to the moving figures of their chiming clock.
- We hear the music that has entered the consciousness of many operagoers as the very embodiment of Tsar Boris's horror in the hallucination that ends this scene.
- The children's nurse, a rough old peasant woman, tries to comfort Xenia with songs, first the "Song of the Gnat" and then the "Handclapping Game" that she plays with Feodor. At the climax of the handclapping game, when Feodor slaps the nurse on the shoulder, Boris enters, terrifying the old woman.
- The Tsar then turns to his son in order to examine the map of the realm with him.

- Boris praises his son and tells him to study diligently, for someday, perhaps soon, he will rule this realm.
- There follows a long monologue from Boris Tsar, who remarks on his six years of peaceful rule. He finds himself unable to draw comfort from the assurances of soothsayers, from the acclamation of the crowd, even from life itself.
- Then the tone changes, and in the second part he begins to brood darkly on his guilt. His mind becomes so agitated that he sometimes fails to complete his thoughts. Even sleep escapes him, he says, and in the darkness of the night the child Dmitri rises up before him. This devastating image will not leave him; it possesses him, exhausts him, and leaves him crying to God.
- Boris is sung by Rene Pape, his son Feodor is sung by Jonathan Makepeace and his daughter Xenia is sung by Jennifer Zeltan, from the MET performance in 2010
- **Video Clip 3**

- A great commotion now breaks out behind the scene, and Boris sends Feodor to investigate. At the same time, the boyar in attendance enters to announce Prince Shuisky (a powerful boyar and Boris's enemy) and to inform the Tsar that Shuisky has met secretly with a messenger from Krakow.
- Shuisky enters and reports the rise in Poland-Lithuania of a pretender calling himself by that name. Overcome with fear, Boris dismisses his son and begs Shuisky to confirm that the child murdered so many years before in Uglich was indeed Dmitry.
- Seizing the opportunity, Shuisky aggravates the Tsar's dread by giving him a grisly description of the child's body as it lay in state. Boris dismisses Shuisky and falls back into his chair.
- I'm returning to the Zulawski film for the video clip, because of the exquisite acting and singing. Boris is played and sung by Ruggiero Raimondi and his enemy Visali Shuisky is played and sung by Kenneth Riegel

- The action follows in time directly from the previous clip and shows the interaction between a persecuted and guilty Boris and a cunning and evil Shuisky.
- You will also notice that Zulawski exaggerates everything for effect, but in this instance, to show how Shuisky drives Boris insane.
- **Video Clip 4**

- We are now ready for the other great basso scene in this act, the Hallucination Monologue or the “Clock Scene”
- Boris’ reaction to Shuisky’s pointed message is depicted in such a way, by Zulawski’s film, that would be impossible to do on the stage. Boris sinks into a hell of debase fornication and nudity so that I’ve had to sanitize the beginning of this monologue by censoring 51 seconds of the film.
- The clock begin strikes the hour. To Boris's disordered mind, he sees the ghost of the murdered Dmitry. Near collapse, Boris prays to God for mercy on his guilty soul, and the act ends.
- **Video Clip 5**

- *Part IV, Scene 1: Square before St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow*
- A square in front of St Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow
- A crowd of impoverished Muscovite townspeople has gathered in front of the cathedral. In dialogue exchanged among various subgroups of the choir the people learn that inside the cathedral, anathema has just been pronounced on the runaway monk Grigori Otrepiev, whom the authorities have identified as the Pretender.
- The crowd, however, for they are convinced that Grigori and Dmitry are different persons; they are far more concerned that a requiem mass is being sung for the Tsarevich Dmitry, whom they presume to be alive.
- They discuss the advance of Dmitry's army on Moscow and happily anticipate the day when "the Tsarevich" will bring“ death to Boris and his children and ascend the throne which, in their eyes, Godunov had usurped.

- A simpleton or 'holy fool', surrounded by a group of urchins, who taunt him, steal his kopek, and leave him crying.
- Boris enters from the cathedral, and the people beg him for bread. He stops in front of the simpleton and asks, "Why is he crying?"
- The fool replies that the boys have stolen his only kopek and, with a boldness that was a right of a simpleton, asks Boris to have them murdered just as he had murdered the young Tsarevich. Shocked at this indiscretion, Shuisky moves to arrest the simpleton, but Boris intervenes and instead asks the Holy Fool to pray for him.
- The fool refuses, saying that nobody can pray for a Tsar Herod because "the mother of God forbids it." Boris and his train move on, the people disperse, and the simpleton is left alone on stage. The curtain falls as he sings his lament for Russia.
- The next video is from the MET performance in 2010, with Andrei Popov as the simpleton, Rene Pape as Boris and Oleg Balashov as Shuisky
- **Video Clip 6**

- *Part IV, Scene 2: Granovitaya Palace (Boris's Death)*
- The curtain rises to reveal the council of boyars, convened in the Granovitaya Palace in the Kremlin
- Shchelkalov, the clerk to the Duma, reads an edict from Tsar Boris to them, asking that they pronounce sentence on the False Dmitri.
- The Boyars notice that Prince Shuisky is missing.
- He arrives and informs them that the night before, spying through a keyhole, he saw Boris overpowered with fear before the unseen ghost of the dead Tsarevich. Disbelieving Shuisky, the boyars are stunned into silence when Boris himself stumbles in, reeling in panic before this very phantom.
- Boris raves, "Begone! Who says I am a murderer? I am no such thing. He lives, the infant lives. And Shuisky shall be quartered for all his lies!"
- Boris recovers his composure, and tells the assembled boyars that he needs their advice. Shuisky interrupts to say that an old and holy man, Pimen the chronicler, seeks permission to speak with his sovereign.

- Pimen enters and in a complex series of embedded narratives, the venerable monk tells the story of an old blind shepherd to whom the ghost of Dmitry appeared in a dream. Obeying the instructions given him in the dream, the shepherd made a pilgrimage to the Tsarevich's grave in Uglich, where, as he knelt before the grave, his blindness was miraculously cured.
- Boris listens to this story with increasing agitation and, at its conclusion, topples from his throne.
- Boris is sung by Rene Pape, Shuisky is sung by Oleg Balashov and Pimen is sung by Mikhail Petrenko, from the MET production in 2010
- **Video Clip 7**

- The boyars rush to help him. He sends for his son, and then asks them to leave.
- Then begins the final great basso scene in the opera, "Boris's Farewell and Death."
- In a narration that mirrors the agony in his mind yet shows deep love and comfort to his son, Boris instructs the boy how to rule, cautioning him against the boyars and their secret intrigues with Poland-Lithuania, urging him always to listen to the voice of his people, and charging him to care for his sister.
- A choir of monks enters to administer the skhima, a rite of induction into monastic orders that all tsars commonly took at the point of death. The chorus's song strikes a nerve, the words barely audible to the audience but resonating like a great bell in the dying Tsar.

- Boris draws himself to his full majesty for one final shout, "I still am Tsar." Then, pointing to his son, he gasps, "There is your Tsar." Boris collapses and dies as the reminiscence theme associated with his power and majesty is heard one final time in the orchestra.
- Boris Christoff (1914-1993), the Bulgarian bass who is still considered to be the paramount Boris Godunov, certainly since Feodor Chaliapin, was invited to the MET in 1950, only to be refused by the McCarthy anti communist witch hunt.
- He finally was allowed to visit USA in 1956 and debuted as Boris at the San Francisco Opera.
- Lucky for us, a film was made of the Death Scene in Los Angeles, for a Telecast, dated December 10, 1956.
- **Video Clip 8**

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FURTHER READING

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