

LE BUGUE

OPÉRA EN DIRECT DE NEW YORK AU CINÉMA

# BORIS GODOUNOV

Saturday October 9th 2021

MUSIQUE  
M. MOUSSORGSKI  
MISE EN SCÈNE  
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Modest Mussorgski

# BORIS GODOUNOV

Boris Godunov, Tsar of Russia, seized power under opaque circumstances which disturb his serenity. Learning from the monk Pimen of the terrible actions carried out by the sovereign to gain access to the throne, the novice Grigori decides to provoke fate and undertakes to overthrow the Tsar by posing as the legitimate contender for the crown.

*If only one opera were to symbolize Russia, it would undoubtedly be Boris Godunov. Not only does the score admirably sum up the style of Modest Mussorgsky, with its chimes, its orchestra with wild variations and its flamboyant choral scenes, but it draws its strength from the juxtaposition of two planes which answer and interpenetrate masterfully: of a side the imposing, terrifying and pitiful portrait of Boris, usurper tsar devoured by a self-destructive power; on the other, the Russian people, true heroes of the opera, who appear from the first scenes, and return, at regular intervals, to comment on the action and to rush it.*



Conductor  
**Sebastian  
Weigle**



Boris Godounov  
**René  
Pape**  
bass



Grigory  
David Butt  
Philip  
tenor



Shuisky  
**Maxim  
Paster**  
tenor



Shchelkalov  
**Aleksey  
Bogdanov**  
baryton



Pimène  
Ain  
Anger  
bass



Varlaam  
Ryan  
Speedo Green  
Baryton-bass

Date: October 9 th 2021

Time : 6.30pm

Opéra in 1 prolog and 5 scenes by Modest Mussorgski

Run time : 2hrs 20mns

# BORIS GODOUNOV



*World premiere : Mariinsky Theater, Saint Petersburg, February 8th 1874*

After abandoning two opera projects (Salammbô in 1864 and Le Mariage in 1868), Modeste Moussorgsky began writing a new opera libretto based on Pushkin's play Boris Godounov, under the guidance of Vladimir Nikolski. and with the help of Ludmila Chestakova (the sister of the composer Glinka). Mussorgsky wrote the first version of his opera in seven scenes and four acts between October 1868 and December 1869. However, the opera was presented to the imperial authorities in 1870 and rejected by censorship in February 1871 for several reasons: first, a decree prohibited the representation of Russian tsars on lyric stages (decree subsequently amended in 1872). But the main cause of the refusal came mainly from the lack of a leading female role, a love story and a ballet in the opera.

A second version in a prologue and four acts was produced between February 1871 and June 1872, in which the composer rewrote his libretto in the light of The History of the Russian State by Nikolai Karamzin and other historical works. Six of the original seven scenes were retained but reworked, while three new scenes were added (two at Sandomir Palace in Act III and one in Act IV). Once again, Mussorgsky met with a refusal from the authorities in October 1872. But the opera was finally accepted thanks to the insistence of Guennadi Kondratiev (singer and director at the Mariinsky Theater in Saint Petersburg) and Julia Platonova, who was to create the role of Marina. Finally, it was in the form of a voice / piano version that the first publication of the opera, based on the second version of 1872, saw the light of day in 1874.

Three scenes were presented at the Mariinsky Theater on February 5, 1873, allowing Mussorgsky to present important additions for the roles of the innkeeper, and especially Marina Mniszek. The complete creation of the work (second version) was scheduled on February 8, 1874 in the same place, achieving great success with the public.

# Setting



Boris Godunov's action took place between 1598 and 1605, from the coming to power of Boris Godunov until his death and the triumphant arrival of Grigory Otrepiev in Moscow. Generally referred to as the "Time of Troubles" in Russian history, this period is anchored in the plot of the opera thanks to several events: the end of the Riourikide dynasty with the mysterious death of the young Tsarevich Dimitri Ivanovich, the famine from 1601-1603, the arrival of the new pretender to the Russian throne in Poland in 1604, the death of Boris Godunov as well as the arrival of Grigori in Kromy in 1605.

If Pushkin's version does not relate all the historical facts with exactitude (it hides in particular the reign of Fedor I between the death of Ivan the Terrible and the reign of Boris), Mussorgsky is inspired by it in spite of everything in his first version and his opera remains one of the only Russian lyrical works of the historical genre to be passed on to posterity (along with Khovanshchina and Prince Igor of Borodin).

## Music

### Modernity and folk color at Mussorgsky

In many ways, Mussorgsky goes beyond operatic conventions, even if he had to comply with them (presence of a love story, a leading female role and a ballet) to have his opera performed. . Whether in the processions of the choir or in the monologues of the main characters, the scenes of the opera are in reality large paintings very innovative in terms of harmony, counterpoint and orchestral writing. In Pimen's story (first scene in Act I and second in Act IV) or in Boris's visions in Act II, the musical unity of the scenes is ensured by the presence of themes associated with the characters. and their feelings, sometimes qualified as leitmotiven by musicologists. If the numerous re-orchestrations of the opera by Rimsky-Korsakov or Shostakovich may have fueled judgments on the quality of those by Mussorgsky, the fact remains that the original versions of 1869 and 1872 are rich in finds on

the plan of the orchestration, in particular during Act III. If this act is absent from the first version of the opera, it nevertheless offers a strong contrast with the other acts by moving the action to Poland (while the bells present in Boris Godunov's coronation scene are typically Russian ) and foray into a love story.

One of the specificities of the music of Mussorgsky, and more generally of the Group of Five, is the relation to popular music, claimed as constitutive of the Russian musical identity. In contrast to the foreign musical styles (Italian and French) dominating 19th century Russia, the Group of Five, formed by Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Balakirev and Cui, wants to return to their real sources and draws its inspiration from popular melodies, giving a folkloric touch to their works. In Boris Godunov, popular inspiration often comes in the form of an imitation of popular songs such as the Innkeeper's "Song of the Duck" (act I, second scene) or even the children's songs of the old nurse. taking care of Boris' children in act II. But these in no way cite real material, which does not prevent the composer from stylizing certain popular songs: the first coronation choir (Prologue, scene 2), the second song by Varlaam at the inn (act I, scene 2), the play of hands in act II (version of 1872), and finally the scene of popular revolt (act IV, scene 2) with the choir glorifying Khrushchev with irony, the song of Varlaam and Missail and a part of the chorus of revolt which follows their entry. All these passages are as many examples of the diversity of the songs quoted by Mussorgsky, and also show a certain constancy in the presence of the popular material in this opera where the vocality, certainly very close to the recitative style and to a spoken intonation, can nevertheless contrast with a certain lyricism.

## Composer

Modeste Moussorgski 1839-1881



Mussorgsky's family descends from the first Russian monarch of Scandinavian origin, Rurik, via the sovereign princes of Smolensk (the Rurikid dynasty). Modeste was prepared by his parents for a military career and was a pupil of the famous Nicolas Cavalry School; but under the influence of Mili Balakirev, he left the prestigious Preobrazhensky regiment of the Imperial Guard, in which he subsequently entered, and joined the Group of Five, a group of composers and ardent defenders of a national art based on Russian popular music.

This group includes Alexander Borodin, whom he had met in 1856 while serving in the same military hospital in St. Petersburg, Mili Balakirev, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Cesar Cui. His first published musical work is the unfinished opera Salammbô and a cycle of melodies for a solo voice and piano.

From 1863, following the abolition of serfdom in Russia which ruined his family, Mussorgsky had to work as an administrative employee to support himself. He was then thirty years old and, confronted with the failure of his works, too far removed from the academic canons, and with a difficult material situation, he believed to find consolation in the alcohol which he had already known during his passage from three years in the army. In 1879, Daria Leonova undertook a concert tour across Russia for which he was an accompanist pianist. He had several episodes of delirium tremens with the opera singer before returning to the Nicolas Military Hospital in St. Petersburg<sup>3</sup>. He died there at the age of 42. His remains are in the Tikhvin cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery (Saint Petersburg).

## Synopsis



### SCENE 1

Novodevichy Convent, on the outskirts of Moscow.

Boyar Boris Godunov, expected to succeed Tsar Fyodor, who died without an heir, retired to a monastery. The crowd, at the instigation of a police officer, renews its pleas for Boris to accept the imperial crown. Chtchelkalov, secretary of the Duma, announces that Boris refuses the throne. A procession of pilgrims approaches, prophesying the coming of a new tsar. The police officer orders the people to come to the Kremlin the next day.

### SCENE 2

A place inside the Kremlin.

The people applaud Boris who has finally accepted the supreme office. The Tsar appears, agitated by gloomy forebodings, and invites the boyars to come and bow over the tombs of the dead sovereigns, before inviting the whole people to share the feast.

### SCENE 3

A cell in the Convent of the Miracle.

Five years have passed. The old monk Pimen writes his chronicles of Russia. Grigori, the novice who shares his cell awakens from a haunting dream he has just had for the third time. He complains of his seclusion and Pimen urges him not to regret having left the world and to meditate on the life of the great tsars. The old monk then recalls the memory of Ivan the Terrible and his son Fyodor, before regretting that the choice of the new sovereign fell on a regicide. Grigori asks him about the assassination of Tsarevich Dmitri, blamed on Boris. He realizes that the Tsarevich would now be his age and, as Pimen goes out for prayer, invokes divine justice.

### SCENE 4

A hostel on the Lithuanian border.

Enter two beggar monks, Varlaam and Missaïl, accompanied by Grigori who, pursued by the police, hopes to reach the border. He remains thoughtful, aside, as Varlaam sings the Kazan song. A patrol arrives in search of the fugitive monk. With the guards unable to read the arrest warrant, Grigori volunteered and improvised a description that matches Varlaam's. The latter, painfully deciphering the text in his turn, unmasks Grigori who manages to escape by jumping out of a window.

### SCENE 5

The Tsar's apartments in the Kremlin.

Xenia, Boris' daughter, mourns the death of her fiancé while her brother Fyodor, the Tsarevich, studies geography. Boris appears. He comforts his daughter and encourages Fyodor to know this kingdom which one day will perhaps come back to him. Then, he begins a painful meditation on the weight of his burden: despite his desire for social and political reforms, the people do not understand. A boyar announces Prince Chouïski who asks for an audience. He manages to sow confusion in Boris's mind by revealing to him that a usurper has appeared in Lithuania, supported by the Poles and even by the Pope, who poses as the late Tsarevich. Boris then takes his son out and begs Chouïski to confirm to him that Dimitri has indeed been buried in Uglich. The prince takes great pleasure in describing the details of the child's death to her. Unable to hear more, Boris dismisses him, then collapses, devastated by the sight of the assassinated Tsarevich.

### SCENE 6

A square in front of Saint Basil's Cathedral.

The people comment on the news of the victories won by the impostor's troops against Boris. There is a rumor that Grigori has been excommunicated. A bunch of kids run up, harassing an innocent man. When Boris appears among the boyars, the innocent asks him to punish the kids as he once killed the Tsarevich. Chouïski wants him arrested. But Boris stops him and asks the innocent to pray for his salvation.

## SCENE 7

A room in the Kremlin.

The Boyars Duma met to deliberate on the rebellion that broke out in Lithuania. The debate is interrupted by the arrival of Shuysky who evokes the delirium of Boris, warding off the ghost of the late Tsarevich. Enter Boris, in the throes of his hallucinations. Gradually recovering his spirits, he accepts to receive the holy man that Chouïski announces to him. Pimen tells how a blind shepherd, who had been ordered in a dream to go and pray at the Tsarevich's grave in Uglich, thus regained his sight. Boris, who had relapsed into deep agitation as the story unfolded, collapsed at Pimen's last words. Sensing his end coming, he summons his son and asks that they be left alone. He bequeaths the throne to him by making his final recommendations. As the death knell sounds, the boyars return. Boris designates Fyodor as his successor to them and then collapses, dead.

**Next BROADCAST of the Metropolitan Opera New York**

# **Fyre Shut Up in my Bones**

## **Composer Terence Blanchard**

**October 23th 2021 6.25pm**

