

Opera & Real Life



9. Russian History & Myth

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NO COURSE ON OPERA AND POLITICS would be complete without mention of Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, whose portrait of a tormented Russian Tsar is as trenchant as any of Shakespeare's depictions of an English King. More than that, it paints for the first time a picture of the ordinary Russian people, couched in the language of their speech, folk songs, and hymns.

Three decades later, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov also called upon folk tradition with his opera *The Invisible City of Kitezh*, based on a Russian legend, and pulsing with Russian religious feeling. But it raises the same problem that we have encountered before: how do you make a religious fable relevant to a more secular and perhaps more cynical age? *rb.*

A. Boris Godunov

Alexandr Pushkin (1799–1837) wrote *Boris Godunov* in 1825 as a verse drama in the manner of Shakespeare. But not for performance; such a subject was not acceptable to the censors; it would have to wait until 1870 to be seen on stage. Meanwhile **Modest Mussorgsky** (1839–81) had submitted his first operatic version of Pushkin's drama in 1869; it was rejected, but the composer came back in 1872 with extensive alterations and additions, and this version eventually found an audience, even though critics decried the naivete of the music, and it only found international acceptance after it had been reorchestrated in 1896 by **Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844–1908). Recent taste has shifted to accept Mussorgsky's 1869 original as the preferred version.

Both play and opera are set in the turbulent time of transition between the **Ryurik** and **Romanov** dynasties in Russia, roughly contemporary with the transition between the Tudors and Stuarts in England. The Ryuriks died out because **Fyodor I**, the elder son of **Ivan the Terrible** had no interest in ruling and his younger brother—the

Tsarevich **Dmitriy**—died under mysterious circumstances as a child. The power vacuum was filled by Boris Godunov, first as *de-facto* regent, and then by election as Tsar; this is where the opera begins. But Boris' position is weakened by three things: (a) the rumor that he was responsible for the death of the young Tsarevich; (b) a nationwide famine; and (c) the campaign of a pretender, the **False Dmitriy**, who claims to be the Tsarevich who has escaped death. Depending on the version, the opera ends either with the death of Boris, or the ascension of the False Dmitriy takes the throne. In fact, he was also soon murdered, as were two other pretenders and the next Tsar.

We shall watch parts of six scenes from a conflation of the 1869 and 1872 versions of the opera. I have omitted the romantic additions made in the 1872 score, and tried to preserve Mussorgsky's alternation between scenes for the people and those for Boris himself.

- **A monastery.** Fyodor I has died. The people are forced to express their desire for a new Tsar.
- **Kremlin.** Boris is crowned Tsar; the people are urged to praise him. He enters with a prayer.
- **The Tsar's apartments.** Prince Shiusky tells Boris of the False Dmitriy. He demands proof that the real one is dead.
- **Outside St. Basil's Cathedral.** The crowd begin to turn against Boris. A Holy Simpleton enters, and is teased by the children.
- **The Tsar's apartments.** On the verge of death, Boris instructs his son on how to be an effective ruler.
- **Outside Moscow.** The country slips into anarchy. The False Dmitriy promises concord, but it is illusory.

♪ **Mussorgsky:** *Boris Godunov*, excerpts as listed

St. Petersburg 1990; c. Valery Gergiev, d. Andei Tarkovsky;
Robert Lloyd (Boris)

B. The Invisible City

The Invisible City of Kitezh is a sort of inland Russian Atlantis, a city that can vanish whenever it is attacked, or threatened by non-believers. You can sometimes see its reflection in the lake, but without faith you can never reach it. In **Rimsky-Korsakov's** 1904 opera, that

faith is explicitly Christian, which makes it unique in his oeuvre. **Dmitry Tcherniakov**, who directs the 2014 **Dutch National Opera** production we shall sample, looks instead for modern solutions that respect people's religious beliefs, but rely on human nature rather than miracles for their outcome. He imagines a scenario in which the earth has suffered some major disaster and (in his words) "All live in expectation of inevitable death and the end of all things; they try to discover how and where they will use the time left to them." The scene descriptions below follow his interpretation rather than the literal indications in the score. [*Italicized sections will not be shown.*]

- **The forest.** Fevronia lives in the forest, in harmony with nature and the animals. [*Not knowing who he is, she tends to Prince Vsevolod who has been wounded while hunting; they fall in love, and she accepts his proposal.*]
- **An inn.** The people waste their time drinking and merrymaking, led by the notorious drunkard Grishka. [*Most, however, pay their respects to Fevronia when she passes through on the way to her wedding.*] The inn is raided by the pagan Tatars, bent on genocide and rape. They capture Fevronia and enlist Grishka.
- **A commune.** Meanwhile, the people of Kitezh live in a religious commune, led by Vsevorod's father Prince Yuri. [*A messenger warns them of their almost certain annihilation by the approaching Tatars.*] The men go out to fight, leaving the women and children behind.
- **The forest.** [*Grishka and the Tatars get lost in the fog that surrounds the city; they threaten to kill him, but the ever-generous Fevronia helps him escape. As Act IV begins, they are wandering together in the wintry forest. Grishka goes mad and runs off.*] Fevronia, wounded and exhausted, lies down to die. But then she hears birdsong and sees blossoming flowers. A dream, or a miracle?

♪ **Rimsky-Korsakov:** *The Invisible City of Kitezh*, excerpts as listed

Amsterdam 2014; c. Marc Albrecht, d. Dmitri Tcherniakov;
Svetlana Ignatovich (Fevronia)

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