

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Modest Musorgsky

Boris Godunov

## ART AND AUTOCRACY

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Historical dramas were popular everywhere in the nineteenth century; the Parisian *grand opéra*, as we know, consisted of virtually nothing but. Artistic representations of history in all media had a special importance in Russia, however, and a special cachet. That was because by the latter half of the nineteenth century Russia was the only remaining autocratic state in Europe. Everywhere else monarchies had been at least to some degree constitutionalized, but in Russia the tsar's authority was absolute, neither fettered by law nor shared with a parliament. Public debate of social and political issues was more severely circumscribed than anywhere else, and liberal opinion usually had to be camouflaged in what was called “Aesopian” language. That is, it had to take place in the guise of scholarship or art, on the understanding that sophisticated readers would interpret such writings, objects, and performances metaphorically, alive to its potential contemporary relevance.

As a result, artists and scholars in Russia felt a greater obligation than anywhere else to invest their work with content “worthy of the attention of a thinking man,”<sup>3</sup> to quote the radical writer Nikolai Cherniševsky (1828–89), an expert Aesopian (but not always a successful one: he spent many years of his life in prison or exile). Nowhere else was the content of art ever subjected to such scrutiny, both by official censors on the lookout for subversion, and by subversive thinkers on the lookout for ammunition. Nowhere was art so fraught with subtexts, nowhere was it invested with greater civic or social value, nowhere was it practiced with greater risk or greater zeal. Nowhere was there less interest in art's purely “decorative” role. Russian esthetics tended toward the ethical, even the “utilitarian.” Art was valued to the extent that it was seen to do good. And so it was very difficult if not impossible to say whether the subtexts and the values that engaged “the thinking man” were drawn out of the artworks in which they were spotted, or were being read into them. Interpretation is always a two-way street. In Russia it became a teeming thoroughfare.

This set of values disrupted the nexus of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful” on which romanticism was founded, and greatly magnified the general drift away from romanticism toward realism, which regarded beauty with skepticism. (To make things look beautiful was usually to lie; nothing good could come of that.) It gave “outsider” artists like Musorgsky, already predisposed toward a countercultural, “avant-garde” posture, a greatly empowering sense of mission. His artistic and esthetic coming-of-age, moreover, coincided with one of the most permissive moments in Russian intellectual history: the aftermath of the disastrous Crimean War, and the upheavals wrought by the emancipation of the serfs (Russian peasants bound by feudal law to work the estates of landowners as chattels; Musorgsky's own family was one of the many petty aristocratic clans that were ruined by the emancipation). To curb social unrest and maintain the good will of the educated classes, or intelligentsia, Russian censorship was significantly relaxed in the 1860s and 1870s.

Musorgsky's letters began filling up with memorable slogans. He became, as one critic eventually dubbed him, the “thinking realist of the Russian operatic stage.”<sup>4</sup> To a friend he exclaimed, “the past in the present—there's my task!”<sup>5</sup> In so saying, he explicitly embraced the “Aesopian” cause and implicitly acknowledged that he had evolved his radical new style for its sake.

The recipient of this avowal, a history teacher named Vladimir Nikolsky, supplied Musorgsky with the ideal subject on which to exercise his skills: *Boris Godunov*, a fairly old (1825) but little-known play by Alexander Pushkin, composed in deliberate imitation of Shakespeare's “histories,” and of *Henry IV* in particular. Like Shakespeare's King Henry, with his famous soliloquy, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” Boris Godunov was a troubled ruler. According to widely accepted (but now refuted) tradition, Boris had ascended to the Russian throne in 1598 by having the legitimate heir, the nine-year-old Tsarevich Dmitry (youngest son of Ivan the Terrible), murdered. Tormented both by his conscience and by a pretender to the throne who claimed

to be the risen Dmitry, Boris undergoes a steady decline, throughout the opera, to an early death, even as chaos tragically envelops Russia.

Immediately Pushkin's play became a covert treatise on kingship and legitimacy, dangerous subjects to raise within the borders of an absolute monarchy. If it was still little known in 1868, that was because until 1866 it had languished under the censor's ban, and was as yet unperformed. That did not faze Musorgsky in the slightest, even though censorship restrictions on operas were even more stringent than those on plays, and included one proviso that would seem to doom the project from the start: according to law, no Russian ruler could be portrayed in the servile act of singing before an audience.

The composer's antiprofessional attitude insulated him against such practical considerations, and this play had everything he needed: the same "Shakespearean" mixture of poetry and prose, tragedy and comedy, that had attracted Verdi; a wide range of character types from noble to beggar, to be characterized by distinctively musicalized speech; a large role for the crowd, which could (in unprecedented fashion) be treated as naturalistically as the soloists, thus advancing the realist program "toward new shores,"<sup>6</sup> to quote another Musorgskian slogan (for like any "scientist," Musorgsky was a firm believer in technological progress).

He never noticed, at first, that there were hardly any female characters, or that Pushkin had treated the one character who might have been suitable for a prima donna role in sketchy fashion and never provided her with a proper love scene. Indeed, Musorgsky cut her out of the opera altogether, because the one drawback Pushkin's play presented was its length. The composer intended to set it verbatim, as he had *Marriage* (or Dargomizhsky *The Stone Guest*), but unlike those, Pushkin's was a full-evening's spectacle. If set to music as it stood, it would have rivaled Wagner's *Ring*. It had to be radically scaled down.

Musorgsky retained two scenes just as Pushkin had written them, and placed them side by side for maximum "Shakespearean" contrast. One took place in a monastery where the monk Grishka Otrepyev, egged on by Pimen, a chronicler who reveals to him Boris's criminal illegitimacy, hatches his plan to topple the tsar by becoming a pretender. It is cast in Shakespearean poetry: blank (that is, unrhymed) iambic pentameter, a new meter for the Russian language, and one that maintained a lofty cadence without sounding "artificial." The other scene set verbatim was one that took place in an inn near the Lithuanian border, where Grishka, posing as Dmitry and accompanied by a pair of roistering monks modeled on Shakespeare's Falstaff, barely escapes capture. It is a comic scene, cast in prose, and therefore a Musorgskian must. For the rest, as if cutting the Gordian knot, Musorgsky simply threw out every scene in which the title character failed to appear, then regrouped and conflated what remained. Almost every line of the opera's text came from Pushkin, but less than half of Pushkin was used: it was the truth and (pretty much) nothing but the truth, so to speak, but not the whole truth.

To give an idea of Musorgsky's *Boris* at its poetic and prosaic extremes, we can compare two starkly contrasting scenes in which Boris confronts the crowd. The first, the most famous in the opera, is the second scene of the prologue, the so-called Coronation Scene. Its text consists of a single speech for the title character, set off by one of Musorgsky's few additions to Pushkin's script: a choral procession, sung to the tune (and most of the words) of an old Russian folk song. The song is there, of course, to lend an authentic period flavor to a scene of public ritual, and also because more traditional theorists of realist esthetics (including Chernishevsky, who wrote a treatise on the subject) cited folk song rather than speech as the "natural model" for music.<sup>7</sup> But Musorgsky's attitude toward this sort of verisimilitude was actually rather lax compared with his exacting standards of fidelity to the patterns of speech. On this level it was enough for him to conform to his audience's casual expectations rather than chart new ground.



**fig. 12-3** *Boris Godunov*, Act III, scene 2 (“Death of Boris”): Martti Talvela on the throne in the title role with set by Ming Cho Lee (Metropolitan Opera, New York, 1974).

The tune he used was famous—not least, ironically enough, because Beethoven had used it in a quartet dedicated to Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna, who had given Beethoven a folk song anthology to mine for the purpose. The song from that collection (first published in 1790) to which both Beethoven and Musorgsky had recourse is shown in Ex. 12-2. The words—“As to thee, God in heaven, there is glory, let there be glory to the Tsar”—clearly recommended themselves as Coronation fodder. And yet anyone who really knew folklore (as Musorgsky, despite his reputation as a “nationalist,” did not!) would have known from the heading in Ex. 12-2 that the song was a Yuletide song, not a coronation anthem, and would have known from the very word that caught Musorgsky's eye—*Slava* (Glory)—that it was a song meant to accompany a girls' fortune-telling game.

Uzh kak sla - va Te - be Bo - zhe na ne - be - si - - - - - sla - va.

**ex. 12-2 *Slava*, original folk melody (from Nikolai Lvov and Johann Pratsch, *Russkiye narodniye pesni*, 1790)**

It would be worse than pedantic to accuse Musorgsky of an error here. The knowledge that it takes to spot it is mere “book learning”; a more authentic original might well have been less “legible” to the audience as an emblem of Boris's power, representing the zenith from which he will spend the rest of the opera falling. Far more important to Musorgsky was the declamatory realism that informs the brief central monologue, for this was, according to his theory, the very crux of dramatic truth. The broad features of Podkolyosin's comic recitative, as we observed them in Ex. 12-1, are all in place. The range has been much widened, however; upbeats are sometimes lengthened to full-beat quarter notes; and the use of consonant melodic leaps in place of Podkolyosin's augmented and diminished intervals “lyricalize” the utterance. These departures from the conversational norm are admitted in order to elevate Boris's diction to the level of tragic eloquence; he assumes, as it were, the emotionally exalted tone that Russians actually adopt, even in casual or domestic surroundings, when they recite poetry.

The composer-critic César Cui, also a “kuchkist” (member of the *moguchaya kuchka*, or “mighty band,” around Balakirev), christened this style “melodic recitative” in his newspaper reviews.<sup>8</sup> It is still classifiable as recitative because of its strict one-note-per-syllable declamation, its abundance of short repeated notes, its faithful mirroring of the intonational contour of the spoken language, and (beyond the two opening phrases) its absence of melodic repetitions, so that its shape is wholly dependent on that of the text. The poetry is the mistress, as Monteverdi would have said, the music the handmaiden. But each melodic phrase has “song potential”; one can easily imagine its development into an arioso.

The harmonization is deliberately archaic, “modal.” Halfway through (Ex. 12-3) the key signature is “cleared”; at m. 18, the tone centers become difficult to identify in terms of functional harmony. Is Boris's first line (*Teper' poklonimsya...*, “Now let us bow down”) centered on A? Then why does it end on B? Is the mode “Aeolian,” as the little progression before Boris's entry seems to suggest with its minor V chord? Then what is the status of the F#? Part of an applied dominant to G? But what is the status of G? Or is the mode “Dorian”? Even within a tonal idiom as resolutely diatonic as this one it is possible to make radical departures from functional norms to evoke “otherness” (another time, another place), yet do it with “realistic” (albeit imaginary) specificity.


Te-per' po - klo-nim-sya po - chi - yu-shchim v la - sti - te-lyam Ro - si - i.

A tam - szí - vat' na - rod na pir, vsekh ot bo -

yar, do ni-shche-go slep - tsa; vsem vol'-niy vkhod, vse — go - sti do - ro - gi - ye!

ex. 12-3 Modest Musorgsky *Boris Godunov*, Coronation Scene, Boris's monologue

## Notes:

(3) Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, "The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality" (1855), in N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), p. 379. [Get at KU](#) 

(4) Hermann Laroche (German Larosh), "Misl'yashchiy realist v russkoy opere," *Golos* (St. Petersburg), 13 February 1874.

(5) Musorgsky to V. V. Stasov, 13 June 1872; Musorgsky, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 132.

(6) Musorgsky to V. V. Stasov, 18 October 1872; *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 141.

(7) See R. Taruskin, "Realism as Preached and Practiced: The Russian *Opéra dialogué*," *Musical Quarterly* LVI (1970): 434–37.

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(8) See César Cui, "Operniy sezon v Peterburge" (1864); in Cui, *Izbranniye stat'i* (Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1952), p. 36.



**Citation (MLA):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 12 Cutting Things Down to Size." *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford University Press. New York, USA. n.d. Web. 24 Nov. 2024. <<https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-012002.xml>>.

**Citation (APA):** Taruskin, R. (n.d.). Chapter 12 Cutting Things Down to Size. In *Oxford University Press, Music in the Nineteenth Century*. New York, USA. Retrieved 24 Nov. 2024, from <https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-012002.xml>

**Citation (Chicago):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 12 Cutting Things Down to Size." In *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press. (New York, USA, n.d.). Retrieved 24 Nov. 2024, from <https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-012002.xml>

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