

Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Boris Godunov

CRISIS

Chapter: CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The complementary scene to the Coronation in *Boris Godunov* is the stark “Scene at St. Basil's Shrine” at the other end of the opera, in which Boris again confronts the crowd, but now a starving crowd that is no longer acclaiming him but cursing him and demanding bread. At the beginning of the scene they discuss the pretender's progress, and the anathema that is being pronounced on him inside the church on Red Square, where they have gathered. Then there is a bit of byplay for a group of boys tormenting a religious mendicant (called the *yurodiviy*, or Holy Fool), who croons a little song that degenerates into recitative as the accompanying harmony descends in a strange mudslide by semitones. The boys steal his penny. At this point Boris and his retinue come out of the church, and the *yurodiviy* confronts him, asking that he have the boys who vexed him killed, just like the tsarevich. When Boris has recoiled in horror and left the stage, the *yurodiviy* resumes his chaotic song, turning it into a lament for suffering Russia. The scene grinds to a baleful halt on an unprecedented unresolved dominant in the bass.

It is a searing moment, this scene of “speaking truth to power,” and Musorgsky must surely have been counting on the audience to “read” it in terms of its subversive contemporary relevance. In its “thematization” of truth, the great cause for which realist art was prepared to sacrifice all beauty of form, the scene can be deemed an emblem of its moment in history, and Musorgsky did everything he could to accentuate its blunt primitiveness, which he regarded as the source of its power. Except for the *yurodiviy*'s song, which begins in the manner of a folk tune but dissolves into slime, and the choral song of supplication that greets the tsar, the whole scene is carried along in prose recitative, even the long choral “discussion” in which the various sections of the chorus confront and react to one another, and to the peasant Mityukha, whom they are questioning, like individual characters.

Boris's own role in the scene is very short but telling (Ex. 12-5). His manner of declamation has changed. All of his upbeats are now carried by eighth notes rather than quarters—a sure sign of prose setting, and a clue that the character's stature has been diminished. All in all, the Scene at St. Basil's Shrine, completed “during the night of May 21–22 1869” according to a note on the autograph vocal score, is the most extreme and concentrated dose of serious musical realism ever to be administered during the nineteenth century. But to say that is misleading, for the scene was never performed during Musorgsky's lifetime, nor published until 1926, two years before its public premiere. It was dropped in the course of revising the score in 1870–72, after the opera had been rejected for staging by the Russian imperial theaters.

The rejection might have been predicted, but it was not an ideological rejection. The review committee comprised musicians only, and the single reason given for turning the opera down was the lack of a prima donna role. It was easily supplied, since Pushkin had included some scenes showing the pretender's progress in Poland, where the Princess Marina Mnizsek seduced him and co-opted his campaign at the behest of the Jesuits. Musorgsky expanded their “scene at the fountain” into the required love duet, and even added a scene in Marina's dressing room to give her a solo aria.

That made the opera more conventional, far less a “realist” manifesto. The legend has arisen that Musorgsky had to revise the opera against his will in order to make it palatable not only to musical but to political authorities. (It is a legend all the more readily believed in the twentieth century, when Russian artists were often forced to make highly publicized compromises with a totalitarian regime.) In fact, Musorgsky went so much further than required in his revisions that duress cannot account for them all. They went to the root of his dramatic and musical conception, something in which the bureaucrats vetting the libretto's content took little interest.

ex. 12-5 Modest Musorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, Scene at St. Basil's Shrine

In order to create the “Polish” scenes, Musorgsky had to add a great deal of his own to Pushkin's text. But then he went back and de-Pushkinized a great deal more. In particular he took out the Scene at St. Basil's Shrine, which followed Pushkin, and replaced it with another scene, with which he eventually ended the opera, in which the crowd is shown in active revolt against Boris—something far more potentially subversive than the deleted scene, and quite contrary to Pushkin's view of history. The only part of the original scene that survived was the episode of the *yurodiviy* and the boys, and the concluding song of woe, which now ends the entire opera (on the dominant!) to harrowing effect.

If the opera's revision is assumed to have been an ideological one, these facts are simply paradoxical. A more plausible explanation for the replacement is found in a letter the composer sent a friend in July 1870, while the opera was in limbo between submission and rejection. He had played it through for a select group of friends and sympathizers, and was disconcerted at its reception: “As regards the peasants in *Boris*,” he wrote, “some found them to be *bouffe*(!), while others saw tragedy.” (The parenthetical exclamation point is the composer's.)⁹

In other words, the composer found that in the eyes—or rather, ears—of his audience, even a handpicked audience, prose recitative ineluctably spelled “comedy,” its traditional medium, however tragic the actual content of the drama. Musorgsky's first impulse to revise his opera came not from the demands of the imperial theaters, but from his own private experience of communications-failure. It led him to reconsider his whole operatic technique, indeed his entire esthetic stance, with an eye toward clarifying the *genre* of the opera—that is, toward making decisive the contrast between what was “*bouffe*” and what was not, and generally toward elevating the tone of the opera to the level of tragedy, Shakespearean or otherwise. The lesson we may draw from his experience is that realism = comedy and comedy = realism, and that realism, like comedy, entails a lowering of tone. All of this, of course, is saying no more than what common sense already knows—that tragedy, like all beautiful or uplifting (“high”) art, is a lie. Fully to disenchant or disillusion art in the name of literal or “scientific” truth risks destroying its power.

Thus the motivation for the most telling revision of all. In order to restore Tsar Boris to his full tragic dimension on the operatic stage, Musorgsky turned his back on all his prized theories and (as he put it in a letter to his best friend, the arts publicist Vladimir Stasov) “perpetrated” a traditional aria for the title character.¹⁰ What in the original version had been a naturalistic recitative setting of Pushkin's counterpart to Shakespeare's great “Uneasy lies the head” soliloquy, cast amid a tissue of leitmotives, became after revision a lyrical outpouring in the grand manner, for which purpose Musorgsky borrowed a broad melody from an old abandoned opera project on the subject of Gustave Flaubert's “orientalist” novel *Salammbô*, and gave it a spacious development not only in the orchestra but in the voice as well.

Notes:

(9) Musorgsky to Rimsky-Korsakov, 23 July 1870; *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 117.

(10) Musorgsky to V. V. Stasov, 10 August 1871; *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 122.

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