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Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* Revisited

Caryl Emerson and Robert William Oldani. *Modest Musorgsky and* **Boris Godunov:** *Myths, Realities, Reconsiderations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xiii, 339 pp. Illustrations. Tables. Select Bibliography. Index. $59.95, cloth.

Boris Godunov is probably one of the most controversial operas in the whole of Russian operatic history, and, quite possibly, one of the uniquely enigmatic works in the entire West European history of the genre. Written by Musorgsky in two significantly differing versions, the opera has never been performed in the shape and form conceived by its creator, whose conception has many times been worked on, reworked and distorted by a great number of composers, musicologists, directors, conductors and producers. From day one the opera was surrounded by tales and myths, beginning with the historical events it depicts (was the historical Boris guilty of murder?), the personality and professional qualifications of the composer (he was customarily accused of incompetence)—and ending with the origins of the libretto (was the opera based only on Pushkin's play?).

Throughout its history *Boris Godunov* was viewed as a political statement. This tendency to use ideology and social criteria as the main instruments for understanding the artistic process reached its peak during the half-century of Soviet intervention in literature, music, theatre and other forms of artistic expression. This was also a time of intensive research on Musorgsky which led to prolific and, sometimes, profound pieces of scholarship, when the "mythologization" of *Boris Godunov* intensified and Musorgsky was made an icon in the pantheon of Soviet cultural and artistic ideology, his views and convictions used and twisted for a variety of ideological causes. This does not mean that the entire body of Soviet and Western research into Musorgsky's opera can or should be dismissed. On the contrary, throughout these years a wealth of materials and research was accumulated. However, with the disintegration of the Soviet empire and its ideological dogmas and the ensuing re-evaluation and rethinking in all fields of the humanities in post-Communist Russia, a reconsideration of Musorgsky and *Boris Godunov* is high on the agenda of musicologists, literary critics, art historians and performers.

The book under review is one of the first such responses. It attempts to reconsider pressing issues of the past era. It is a comprehensive study that successfully challenges myths that have surrounded Musorgsky's opera for more than 100 years and places *Boris Godunov* scholarship where it should have been in the first place: on historical, literary, musical and aesthetic foundations. Emerson's and Oldani's interests in Musorgsky and his opera are not new. The authors have behind them more than a decade of publishing articles and delivering papers at conferences and symposia. Moreover, Caryl Emerson wrote *Boris Godunov: Transposition of a Russian Theme* (Indiana University, 1986). The two scholars are an ideal team: Emerson's expertise in Russian literature, her extensive research into musico-literary relations and her studies on *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina* complement Oldani's specialization in the history of Russian music, his deep interest in musicological research on Musorgsky in general, and his ongoing textual investigations of *Boris Godunov*'s versions in particular.

The book consists of three parts. In part I ("Background") the reader is given the story of the opera: its conception, composition, rejection, revision, and acceptance. This is accompanied by a discussion of historical problems (Tsar Boris in history), of literary sources, and a narrative and musical synopsis of the opera. Most of the myths, tales and factual distortions that surrounded *Boris* after its creation are identified here. Part I concludes with a description of the two main productions of the opera (one at the end of the nineteenth century and another in 1908) that established the performing tradition around the world. Part II ("Entr'acte") brings to the fore the most important texts of criticism and discusses—while extensively quoting from documents—the problem of censorship. The concluding part III ("Interpretation") is a twofold study of the opera's musical structure and the libretto as a formal, literary and historical problem. The discussion here concentrates on approaches to the opera's scholarship and performance in the postcommunist period. The reader will find a detailed description of the latest performances of the opera in the chapter "*Boris Godunov* during the Jubilee decade: the 1980s and beyond." The latter not only presents an account of recent events, but also raises the future challenges facing the entire field of Musorgsky scholarship and performance. The book has elaborate reference material: notes, selected bibliography, index and, for the first time, a complete discography of the opera with detailed analysis of the versions of scores and orchestrations used in each recording.

To publish archival or other important materials about Musorgsky and his works, Soviet writers were forced often to express ideas incompatible with their own findings. In our discussion we will try to compare some of the Soviet-era texts with new ideas found in the present book.

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Musorgsky's political and historical views are an important topic in this book. Historical events surrounding the reign of Boris Godunov are examined in relation to Musorgsky's work. A comparison of the myth of Godunov-as-murderer—the role he has in the opera as well as in Pushkin and Karamzin—to the record of his statesmanship reveals the complexity of Musorgsky's approach to history. The composer was always attracted to social cataclysms, crisis periods, the troubled times in Russia's past (*smutnyie vremena*), the spirit of which he so masterfully captured in his historical operas. The artistic and emotional truth for him lay not in factual historical events, but rather in the spiritual essence of a historical era: this allowed Musorgsky to speak of emotional tensions and a clash between accident and fate. The authors see the composer as a "profoundly mystical and pessimistic historical thinker" (p. 11)—not the populist "progressive," "materialistic" hero portrayed by Soviet critics who saw in Musorgsky's works a consistent glorification of the people.

Musorgsky's "progressivism" was presented in the Soviet period as indisputable fact. In this respect, it is interesting to see how the prominent Musorgsky scholar, Alexandra Orlova, struggled with facts in order to prove the composer's "progressive" populism. In her introduction to the first volume *Epistoliarnoie nasledie Musorgskogo* (Musorgsky's Epistolary Heritage), she indicated that "only in rare cases... were Musorgsky's aesthetic views in contradiction with the line of his work."[1] Some of his statements, she continued, were unexpected and difficult to understand, "as if they were in clear conflict with his creative work."[2] Orlova dismisses as "misunderstandings" Musorgsky's critical attitude toward N. Nekrasov and the "social motifs" in his poetry; the composer's letters in praise of the poets M. Lermontov and A. Golenishchev-Kutuzov whose works, in Musorgsky's approving opinion, are devoid of social content; his anti-Polish and anti-Semitic remarks. As the poet of a deprived people, a composer-democrat and socially conscious citizen, Musorgsky could not be allowed to have such views. He was made to look (with minor exceptions) like a consistent bearer of perfect progressive ideology which, in fact, he was not. Emerson's and Oldani's portrait of Musorgsky as a political thinker carries all the complexities and conflicts of his personality and his era. Their book shows Musorgsky as a man reflecting the trends and contradictions of the 1860s and 1870s which were marked by end of serfdom. Being

1 A.A. Orlova and M.S. Pekelis, editors, *Modest Petrovich Musorgskii. Literaturnoe nasledie: Pis'ma, biograficheskie materialy i dokumenty* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1971) 7.
2 Orlova and Pekelis 12.

compassionate toward the people and believing that "the history of a people belongs to the people," he radically changed "the way in which the tale of Boris was read." However, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, he "did not glorify the people, their past and future" (p. 11). The authors underline the uniqueness of Musorgsky-the-thinker who "belonged to a category of his own," and present a new interpretation of composer's views and creativity. "He was certainly no conservative, but he could not share his populist contemporaries' positivist and optimistic temperament.... The man, and his work, were more complexly cosmopolitan than has often been assumed" (p. 224). This is a far-reaching conclusion which not only contradicts the traditionally fierce nationalistic portrayal of the composer, but also sets him apart from other members of the *Mighty Handful*.

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The question of the opera's literary sources was a non-issue for students of Musorgsky in the Soviet Union up to the beginning of the 1980s. The only source attributed to Musorgsky in Soviet or Western studies of this period was Alexander Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov*, despite the fact that the composer himself wrote on the title page of the libretto: "After Pushkin and Karamzin." The second source, Nikolai Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*, was downplayed or totally ignored by Soviet critics (and their Western counterparts of the time), although there is no doubt that Soviet musicologists knew about the Karamzin-Musorgsky connection. Ignoring it became a tradition as was evident even in the works of the most prominent Soviet scholars, such as B. Asafiev, G. Khubov and S. Shlifshtein. There were several reasons for this conspiracy of silence. The most important of them, as Emerson and Oldani inform us, was the fact that the influence of Karamzin (a monarchist and "reactionary" in Soviet interpretations) did not fit into the idealized and consistently populist, "progressive" image of Musorgsky.

Only in 1981, A. Orlova and M. Shneerson published (typically not in the Soviet Union but in the West) the first analytical study on the topic. Without explaining the reasons why Karamzin's influence was downplayed, the article convincingly demonstrated the important ties between Karamzin's *History* and the work of Musorgsky-the-librettist, tracing the connections not only to certain scenes and characters in the text of the opera, but also finding some of Karamzin's conceptual ideas in the work of the composer. As the study suggests, Musorgsky found in the *History* rich material for his second version of the opera with its more pronounced psychological conflict. However, the study does not address the manner in which Musorgsky rethought and reworked Karamzin's concepts.

Emerson and Oldani discuss the composer's reading of Karamzin's *History* in detail. Continuing the investigation started by Orlova and Shneerson, they present the most inclusive study to date of the literary sources of the opera. The analysis of similarities and differences among Pushkin's, Karamzin's and Musorgsky's approaches to the historic, literary and operatic persona of Boris Godunov is conducted in a framework of literary-historical references.[3] We learn that the point of departure for Karamzin was the Napoleonic wars and the liberal beginnings of the reign of Tsar Alexander I. In the historian's interpretation, the lack of royal legitimacy in both Napoleon and the low-born Boris provided a good historical analogy. The argument of legitimacy was developed in Musorgsky as a global notion of futility when one falseness struggles with another falseness and the illegitimate Pretender challenges the illegitimate Tsar.

Such ideas were well-understood in the 1860s when Musorgsky conceived and worked on his opera. This was a time when serfdom was abolished and Slavophilism and populism arose—socio-political events that played a formative role in Musorgsky's populist views and his faith in the virtue of a benevolent power. Emerson and Oldani come to the conclusion that Karamzin and Musorgsky shared the notion of a virtuous Tsar. "Both historian and composer drew on a set of quasi-religious folk beliefs, elevated before mid-century into a coherent ideology by Slavophile thinkers, on the nature of the Russian Tsar and his obligations to the Russian people" (p. 18). These obligations could be fulfilled only by the virtuous Tsar—a criminal Tsar could not perform his duties. Such an interpretation of Musorgsky's treatment of Boris in the opera represents a major reconsideration of the composer's historical thinking and departs sharply from portrayals of a progressive populist in the Soviet vein.

At the same time, the focus of the opera on Boris' guilt rather than the conflict between the people and the Tsar—a standard Soviet idea—is quite different in the interpretation of Karamzin, whom Emerson and Oldani characterize as a moralist that saw history as a moral and cultural development. In Karamzin, Boris is not tormented by his conscience; he is punished by God and his crime. In Musorgsky, the psychological aspect is the main focus. The book shows how Musorgsky was able to extract from Karamzin the concept of

3 The topic of Pushkin's influence on Musorgsky's opera received much coverage in the literature of the past. Therefore, our discussion will be limited to the Musorgsky-Karamzin connections, although the reader will find in the book some interesting and new facts and ideas on the ties between the opera and Pushkin's drama.

Boris's tormented soul and view it as the main vehicle of his destruction.[4] Musorgsky's Boris is much stronger psychologically because, unlike Karamzin who stresses his political significance, the composer does not emphasize the clash between political figures. The opera creates a myth about the tormented soul of the criminal tsar Boris. In the final account, Musorgsky's Boris proves that myth in art can be much stronger than fact in history.

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Musorgsky wrote two versions of his opera, one in 1869 and another in 1874. The similarities and differences between the two became a source of much discussion and confusion after the composer's death in 1881. The book gives an account of numerous misleadingly "corrected" redactions of *Boris Godunov* by several composers and musicologists (from N. Rimsky-Korsakov in 1896 and 1906–07 to D. Lloyd-Jones in 1975). We find here also a fundamental re-examination of the reasons behind Musorgsky's reworking of the first version which has always been explained by expediency, i.e., a desire to have the opera performed. Soviet and Western writers maintained that both versions were rejected by the censors and the Mariinskii Theatre's selection committee—hence the rewriting of the first redaction. Emerson and Oldani dispute the censors' interference with the opera's composition and offer a very different interpretation of events based on the works of R. Taruskin (1985) and their own findings.

The first version, the book states, was written according to the *kuchkist* ideology—i.e., as an *operá dialogue* with a singular emphasis on the verisimilitude of speech transcription into the musical language of recitative—a form Musorgsky used for his unfinished opera *The Marriage*. Prompted by the Mariinski Theatre to add a leading female role and a love element to the plot, Musorgsky created a new text rather than merely adding several scenes to the score. This was a turning point in the aesthetics of the composer, who became disillusioned with "the main *kuchkist* premise of the connections between the text and music" (p. 67). The book convincingly shows the different approaches Musorgsky used in the first and second versions (pp. 70–71) and provides a chronology of their creation. "During the period of *Boris*'s revision and the first

4 The latter notion complements Orlova's and Shneerson's suggestion about another literary connection in *Boris*, namely, the torments of the murderer in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* written shortly before the opera was conceived. The psychological inner struggle of the perpetrator of a crime was very much on the minds of the Russian reader which attests to the actuality of the opera for the musical audience of Musorgsky's times. See Orlova and Shneerson 255.

sketches of *Khovanshchina*, he retreats..., turning with increasing conviction toward greater lyricism; the reason for this probably is his realization that tragedy demands a seriousness of tone that the *kuchkist* idiom could not produce" (p. 76). Without abandoning the *kuchkist* goals of creating a Russian national musical drama, the second version of *Boris* opened up to the contemporary artistic horizons of Western musical theatre. In this respect, one finds in the book many novel observations and documentation of Musorgsky's ability to learn from the stage works of his contemporaries—particularly Verdi, Berlioz and Wagner—and his closer connections with West European (as opposed to purely Russian) musical developments. If the influence of Russian predecessors, such as M. Glinka and A. Dargomyzhsky, was limited to the areas of "techniques of text setting [and] harmonic audacities" (p. 231), then from Verdi and Wagner the creator of *Boris* was able to learn some important lessons in musical dramaturgy (pp. 231–39). Thus, Musorgsky is now placed in a much broader context than simply the *kuchkist* composers. He appears as a *modernist* of his time, with much more cosmopolitan connections to the overall developments of Western art and culture than previously believed. An important inference can be drawn from this new, less nationalistic and more cosmopolitan image of Musorgsky. It helps explain Musorgsky's triumphant conquest of enthusiastic French audiences at the end of the nineteenth century[5] (at a time when he was not a household name even in Russia) and, later, the rest of the Western musical world where his name became the epitome of "russianness" in music as much as the names of L. Tolstoy and F. Dostoevsky were synonymous with "russianness" in literature.

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The existence of two radically different versions on the one hand, and the unceremonious interference into the text on the part of musical theoreticians, composers, conductors, directors and producers on the other, created some serious problems for the staging and performing of the opera and led to startlingly different renditions. Randomly changing the order of scenes and even acts, mixing scenes arbitrarily from two redactions, presenting various orchestrations—all dictated by the political, cultural and other burning issues of the day—became a "norm." As a result, audiences worldwide have always heard

5 This was the time (starting in 1896) when the Russian singer, M.A. Olenina-d'Alheim, and her husband, Pierre d'Alheim, gave their first Musorgsky concert-lecture in Paris and Maurice Ravel first became acquainted with the score of *Boris Godunov*.

and seen an altered *Boris Godunov*—never the one conceived by Musorgsky who unambiguously wanted to see on stage his second version.

Each new *Boris* has been proclaimed a fulfillment of Musorgsky's genuine authorial design. Typical in this respect are the reminiscences of a leading Russian performer of the part of Boris, the bass from the Bolshoi Theatre, Yevgenii Nesterenko. In *Razmyshlenia o professii* (Reflections on a Profession), the singer speaks about the "return to the authentic Musorgsky" and stresses the disparity between Musorgsky's intentions and the editorial changes. His example of an "uncorrupted" version of *Boris* is the one prepared in 1975 by British conductor and musicologist David Lloyd-Jones who, according to the *New Grove Russian Masters 1* "restored Musorgsky's own full score as the basic text while printing other sources separately."[6] Nesterenko calls the Lloyd-Jones score "absolutely free of any editorial intrusion."[7] Emerson's and Oldani's comparative studies of various scores show that this statement, as well as the claim of the New Grove editors, is not entirely correct. They write: "Even the most recent editor of *Boris*, David Lloyd-Jones reinserts onto his main text all the cuts Musorgsky took in revising the five scenes common to the two versions" (p. 68). Speaking about the 1983 Covent Garden production of the opera directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, the authors characterize the Lloyd-Jones edition as "one of the more famous 'supersaturated' *Borises*—that is, it stitches together the fullest versions of everything Musorgsky ever wrote for the opera" (p. 283). Tarkovsky's staging drew from every possible source to convey his interpretation of *Boris* during the tumultuous period of perestroika. Politics and society again took precedence over Musorgsky's intent.

This situation has not changed in our time. Emerson and Oldani challenge scholars and performers "to reconstitute the experience of an opera" and to solve a dilemma: to assume either that *Boris* as an "artwork remains a coherent island, a creative retreat where both auctorial intent and past environment are to large extent recoupable" or to follow a "performance tradition in history" which is "cumulative, multiple authored, messy, 'awake'—and thus perpetually in hostage to the present" (p. 288).

The re-examination and rethinking of Russian disciplines has just begun. The present book is one of the pioneering efforts in this difficult and often painful revisionist enterprise. It sets an example of the possible methodology,

6 David Brown, Gerald Abraham, David Lloyd-Jones, *New Grove Russian Masters 1: Glinka, Borodin, Balakirev, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986) 130.

7 Evgenii Nesterenko, *Razmyshlenia o professii* (Reflections on a Profession) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985) 119.

tone and approaches to the process of re-evaluation. Emerson and Oldani address in a comprehensive manner a broad scope of issues pertaining to the history, sources, musical and textual structure and performing principles of Musorgsky's opera. Their book marks the beginning of a new, critical and open inquiry into problems which need to be considered without ideological or political prejudices and preconceptions.