

## **BORIS GODUNOV**

Modest Mussorgsky

**Prologue:** At the instigation of the Boyars, headed by Shuisky, Russian peasants are forced by police into demonstrating for Boris Godunov's ascension to the vacant throne of Russia. Shchelkalov, Secretary of the Duma (Council of Boyars), appears at the monastery doorway to announce that Boris still refuses and that Russia is doomed. A procession of pilgrims passes, praying to God for help.

Amidst cheering crowds, the great bells of Moscow herald the coronation of Boris. As the procession leaves the cathedral, Boris appears in triumph. Haunted by a strange foreboding, he prays for God's blessing. Addressing his people, he invites them all to the feast, as the crowd resumes rejoicing.

**ACT I:** The old monk Pimen is finishing a history of Russia. Young Grigory, a novice, awakes and describes to Pimen his nightmare in which he climbed a lofty tower and viewed the swarming multitude of Muscovites below who mocked him until he stumbled and fell. Pimen tells Grigory that fasting and prayer bring peace of mind, and compares the quiet solitude of the cloister to the outside world of sin and idle pleasure. Grigory questions Pimen about the dead Tsarevich Dimitri, legal heir to the Russian throne; Pimen recounts how Boris ordered the boy's murder. Left alone, Grigory condemns Boris and his crime and decides to leave the cloister.

Three guests interrupt the innkeeper's ballad: two drunken monks-Varlaam and Missail-and the disguised Grigory, who is being pursued by the police for escaping from the monastery. Now considering it his mission to expose Boris, Grigory is attempting flight to Lithuania, where he will assemble forces and, proclaiming himself the Tsarevich Dimitri, claim the Russian throne. Varlaam passes the time with a song about the Siege of Kazan and dozes off. The innkeeper tells them that the road is blocked by sentries, whereupon one enters with a warrant for Grigory's arrest. Since the police officer cannot read, Grigory reads the warrant for him, pretending it describes Varlaam rather than himself. But when Varlaam reads the true description, Grigory escapes by leaping through a window and crossing into Lithuania.

**ACT II:** Boris' daughter Xenia laments the death of her betrothed and is comforted by her nurse. Boris enters and, studying a map of Russia, tells Feodor, his son, that one day he will rule. Left alone, he ponders the fears that haunt his dreams. Feodor interrupts his torment and is sent away. The Boyar announces the arrival of Prince Shuisky, who has come with word from Poland of a Pretender to the Russian throne, supported by the Polish aristocracy and the Pope. When Boris is told the Pretender claims to be Dimitri, the Tsarevich whom Boris ordered killed at Uglich, he asks how a buried child can march on the Tsar. He promises to forgive Shuisky, whom he loathes and distrusts, all his former acts of treason if he will answer truthfully whether or not the real Dimitri was indeed killed at Uglich. Assuring the Tsar that he was, the wily Shuisky is dismissed. The clock begins to strike as Boris gives way to his terror, imagining that he sees Dimitri's ghost. Stricken with remorse, he begs God's forgiveness for his crime.

**ACT III:** The proud, ambitious Marina Mnishek, daughter of the Lord of Sandomir, muses how she will win the hand of the Pretender Dimitri, through whom she hopes to realize her plans of ascending to the throne of Russia. She is interrupted by the Jesuit Rangoni, who forces her to submit to his will. She is to seduce Dimitri for the good of the Catholic Church and convert the heathen Russians to Catholicism.

As Dimitri wanders through the gardens hoping Marina will remember his love for her, Rangoni appears and reassures Dimitri of Marina's love, despite the insults she has had to endure on his account. Rangoni then urges him to withdraw as the guests assemble to watch a polonaise. Soon Dimitri and Marina are left alone. Marina cold-heartedly shuns his protestations of love until she is certain of his determination to become Tsar. Marina and Dimitri then swear their love and dream of glory.

**ACT IV:** The starving peasants, now disenchanted with Boris, argue whether or not Tsarevich Dimitri still lives, as news reaches them that his troops are near. A group of urchins runs in, tormenting a Simpleton, and steal his only kopeck. Boris and his retinue enter distributing alms; the Simpleton asks Boris to kill the boys the way he killed Dimitri. Shuddering, Boris nonetheless protects the Simpleton from Shuisky's order that he be arrested. Referring to him as a holy man, Boris asks the Simpleton to pray for him, but the Simpleton refuses to intercede with heaven for a murderer. He sadly bewails Russia's dark future.

In response to Boris' message to the Duma that the false Dimitri presumes to dethrone him and claims the Boyars will support him, the Duma discusses how the false Dimitri should be caught and put to death. Arriving late, Shuisky rushes in with the astonishing account of how last night he accidentally observed Boris' frenzied mental anguish and imagined apparition of the murdered Dimitri. Still in a state of delirium, Boris now enters the hall and announces that Shuisky will be hanged for spreading such lies. Shuisky diverts Boris by saying that Pimen is waiting outside for an audience with the Tsar, to which Boris, regaining his composure, agrees. Pimen's story is intended to assure Boris that Tsarevich Dimitri is truly dead; instead it causes him to sink further into despair. Realizing that he is about to die, Boris dismisses the nobles and sends for his son, bidding the boy a moving farewell and naming him heir to the throne.

The peasants seize Khrushchov, a Boyar, jeer at his rank, and ask how he likes being treated the way poor Russians have been abused by Boris. Varlaam and Missail arrive, proclaiming Boris' guilt; the people vow to follow Dimitri and kill Boris. Two unlucky Jesuits, Lavitsky and Chernikovsky, appear and the crowd seizes them for hanging. Then the Pretender Dimitri approaches in triumph with his army. Amid cheers of "Long live our sovereign Dimitri Ivanovich!," he pardons Khrushchov and calls for the people to follow him in his march to Moscow. Only the Simpleton remains, lamenting poor Russia's uncertain fate.