

The Coronation Scene from Modest Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* in Rimsky-Korsakov's Edition

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The group of Russian composers who began to assemble after 1857, consisting of Mily Balakirev, César Cui, Modest Musorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Alexander Borodin, came to be known as the *moguchaia kuchka* (literally, "the mighty little heap," traditionally rendered in English as "the Mighty Handful," or simply "The Five"), after this term first appeared in the Russian press in 1867 to describe this loose configuration of composers. Unified by aesthetic ideas based on the rejection of Western musical forms and the creation of an indigenous Russian music, they were inspired by, and drew upon, the country's rich cultural heritage--an aesthetic derived directly from that established by Mikhail Glinka several decades before.

Since the most readily applicable component of this cultural heritage to the creation of a nationalist music was found in folk song, it is not surprising that the creative impulse of each member of The Five found its most natural and powerful expression in the medium of vocal music, the vocal tradition in Russia being especially strong due to the traditional exclusion of musical instruments in the services of the Russian Orthodox church.

The two most independent thinkers of The Five, Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, were the first to break away from the rigid principles of nationalism in music as espoused by the strong-willed Balakirev. However, besides sharing a common independence of thought, the lives, personalities, and music of these two composers followed totally divergent paths.

Modest Musorgsky's lifelong fascination with social issues is reflected in his music by several innovative techniques developed to convey a sense of psychological depth in his portrayal of the common man. These techniques were most fully

realized in *Boris Godunov*, where formal musical structures and orchestration became more improvisatory and less restrictive in nature, serving to underscore the nuances of thought, feelings, and personalities of characters in the opera. Extraneous musical effects not functioning to advance the plot's dramatic action or to provide closer insight into a character's psychology were avoided. Inspired by the examples of both Glinka (who introduced Russian elements into Italian operatic models forty years earlier) and Alexander Dargomyzhsky (who advocated an original yet restrictive "translation" into music of the intonations of the spoken Russian language), Musorgsky envisioned the creation of "an artistic reproduction of human speech in all its finest shades, that is, *the sounds of human speech*, as the external manifestations of thought and feeling..."¹ This was the composer's musical ideal: the reproduction of speech as it was actually spoken by the peasant, the drunkard, the old woman, the child, the nobleman; in other words, the perfect realization of "living prose in music"² and the attainment of "the language of humanity"³ as it would most vividly depict a character's psychological state. The contours, rhythm, and general nature of such musical material would ideally convey the attributes and personality of each character. In order to reflect the work's innate "Russianness," this musical material incorporated elements derived from folk song, rather than direct quotations from folk material, in shaping melody.

In 1868, at a gathering at the home of Liudmila Shestakova (Glinka's sister), and in the midst of his work on an experimental opera based on Nikolai Gogol's *The Marriage*, Musorgsky met Vladimir Nikolsky, a Russian literature professor and an authority on the work of Pushkin. Nikolsky suggested to the composer that he might consider Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* as a possible subject for an opera. Musorgsky's imagination seized upon the idea at once; he abandoned his work on *The Marriage* (completed only through the first act), and for the next year his inspiration poured forth material at a feverish pitch for what eventually would be molded into a universally acknowledged masterwork.

Pushkin's drama, written in 1824 during a period of political exile, was influenced, like much of Pushkin's work, by nationalistic as much as by classical Western ideals, the former influence in this case being a work of the Russian writer and poet Nikolai Karamzin. His *History of the Russian State* consists of twelve volumes which appeared between 1816 and 1826. It was here that Pushkin found the story of the medieval Russian ruler Boris Godunov. Musorgsky removed the difficulty of staging Pushkin's twenty-two separate scenes by reducing their number to seven. At first these seven independent scenes seem rather disjointed; upon closer examination, however, one realizes that the dramatic element which is sacrificed through compression is more than compensated for by the dramatic impact created by the subtle accumulation of details about the lives and personalities of the characters, and especially those of Tsar Boris himself. The complex personality of Boris Godunov is revealed in glimpses, eventually creating a vividly complete

picture of a multifaceted personality. (Musorgsky's technique of building up layers of impressions in order to flesh out characters made a strong impression upon later composers: Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* were both influenced by Musorgsky's example.)

The opera, completed in December 1869, was submitted by Musorgsky to the reviewing board of the Imperial Opera in St. Petersburg and, after a year's delay, was rejected, the board finding it "too unconventional" and "too modern"; it was, as Richard Anthony Leonard phrases it, "the typical reaction of small minds coming into collision with a great though unfamiliar art."⁴ Undaunted, Musorgsky began to make revisions in the work. It was at about this time--August 1871--when Musorgsky took lodgings with his friend and colleague from The Five, Rimsky-Korsakov, who was himself at work on an opera of his own, *Pskovitianka* (The Maid of Pskov), based upon the historical character Ivan the Terrible. For two such unlike personalities, both in the process of writing important works, to end up living in the same room, sharing the same piano and writing table--and also musical advice, plans, and ideas--is the stuff of which artistic legends are made. Despite their differing aesthetic viewpoints, a deep mutual respect and friendship developed between the two composers both artistically (Rimsky-Korsakov's *Pskovitianka* exhibits a strong Musorgskian influence in its subject matter and generally somber orchestral color) and personally (Rimsky-Korsakov chose Musorgsky to be the best man at his wedding in 1872).

While Musorgsky's musical training was at best barely adequate and always haphazard, that of Rimsky-Korsakov was, like the man himself, highly structured, precise, and methodical. Where Musorgsky relied on raw talent and a penetrating psychological and artistic insight, Rimsky-Korsakov relied on a traditional education gained, however late in life, through an almost obsessive pursuit of knowledge. In 1871, in the wake of his public success as a composer, Rimsky-Korsakov was appointed to the staff of the St. Petersburg Conservatory despite his self-professed ignorance of even rudimentary musical theory ("I had no idea of counterpoint; in harmony I did not know even...the names of the chords"⁵; "I was a dilettante and knew nothing"⁶; "Having been unreservedly accepted at the Conservatory as a professor, I soon became one of its best and possibly its very best pupil"⁷). At the core of this self-education was a humility and a selflessness that also led him to use his talents to promote works of his fellow composers, preparing new performing versions of the operas of his revered Glinka, assisting Cui in orchestrating his opera *William Ratcliff*, twice undertaking the task of orchestrating Dargomyzhsky's *Stone Guest*, and completing and reorchestrating Borodin's *Prince Igor*, which was left in a state of chaos upon the latter's death in 1886.

A task for which he has been criticized, however, has been his editing of nearly all of Musorgsky's musical output after Musorgsky's early death. Musorgsky frequently undertook the composition of one work without finishing the work which preceded it, and Rimsky-Korsakov's formidable labors on behalf of his friend can only be taken as a mark of respect and affection. Yet the revisions Rimsky-Korsakov made to *Boris Godunov* (not once, but twice, in versions of 1896 and 1908) were of an exceptionally large scope and are those for which he drew the most severe criticism. He approached the task with typically meticulous zeal, never hesitating to "correct" every detail which did not meet his rigid academic standards. Musorgsky's precise rendering of the intonations of speech, frequently characterized by unusual intervals, were freely altered to facilitate singing; and his bold and original use of dissonant harmonies and nontraditional modulations were smoothed over to make them more palatable to public tastes. In short, as Richard Taruskin writes, Rimsky-Korsakov took "Musorgsky's most potently original ideas and turn[ed] them back into the very clichés which Musorgsky must have striven to avoid."⁸ However, at his death in 1881, Musorgsky's neglected genius was on the brink of falling into obscurity. A large part of his musical output was left incomplete, and his largest completed work, *Boris Godunov*, was withdrawn from production after only fifteen performances due to continued public controversy regarding its perceived lack of musical merit. Although Rimsky-Korsakov's tastes were too grounded in the traditional to be able to permit him fully to understand Musorgsky's musical language, he undoubtedly felt that the work's merit could be preserved in a more conventional musical medium. Ironically, it was through Rimsky-Korsakov's versions that many of Musorgsky's works became known outside Russia, eventually leading to their acceptance as works of genius. The original versions of Musorgsky's works eventually came to be rediscovered as recognition of their importance increased. In the case of *Boris Godunov*, in recent years, with the appearance of David Lloyd Jones's 1975 critical edition, Musorgsky's original version of the opera has begun to supplant Rimsky-Korsakov's 1908 performing version, which more than one hundred years after the composer's death is still the version with which the public and even most musicians are most familiar.

The manuscript which forms part of the Moldenhauer Archives at the Library of Congress consists of thirty-four measures (including one silent measure and one deleted measure) in six pages in Rimsky-Korsakov's hand of his reworking of the second scene of the Prologue (the Coronation Scene). According to supporting documentation, Moldenhauer obtained the manuscript (perhaps towards 1960) from Broude Brothers Music Publishers in New York. This firm had obtained it from the Russian-born conductor Emil Cooper (1877-1960) who, among his many notable achievements, conducted the premiere of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Golden Cockerel* in 1909, as well as the first performance of *Boris Godunov* outside Russia, in May 1908 in Paris for Serge Diaghilev. A 1960 letter from Irving Broude of Broude Brothers included with the documentation, states that Cooper obtained the manuscript directly from the Rimsky-Korsakov family.

Handwritten musical score on aged paper, featuring multiple staves with musical notation and a large blue 'X' mark across the right side. The score is divided into sections, with the first section labeled "Allegro moderato" and the second section labeled "Allegro molto".

The score includes the following parts and markings:

- Section 1: Allegro moderato** (marked with a circled "35")
- Section 2: Allegro molto** (marked with a circled "35")
- Section 3: Allegro molto** (marked with a circled "35")

The notation includes various rhythmic values, dynamic markings, and articulation symbols. The right side of the page is heavily crossed out with a large blue 'X'.

This manuscript most likely predates Rimsky-Korsakov's 1908 version, in that it differs from the published score of the second version, yet still retains features of the first, 1896 version. In some cases, the voicings and instrumentation exhibited in this manuscript differ significantly from the 1908 version. In measure 8 of the Moldenhauer manuscript, for example, the static triplet figure in the lower strings, which has been repeated from the first measure of that section, suddenly begins to double the bass voice lines of the chorus; in both the 1896 and 1908 published scores, however, the motion of this triplet figure becomes contrapuntally chromatic. Parts included in the 1908 published score for the harp, piano, and expanded percussion section are not represented in this manuscript. Other elements (dynamic markings, metronome markings, stage directions) are used inconsistently if they appear at all.

According to Rimsky-Korsakov's notation, this manuscript contains the section of the score beginning two measures before rehearsal number 35. In the composer's 1908 published score, however, this section is labeled *35bis* ("35-A," or "alternate number 35"). Rimsky-Korsakov was not mistaken: there are actually two rehearsal numbers "35" since the portion of the score contained in the manuscript is one which immediately follows an optional cut of sixteen measures (the reprise of the "pealing of bells" material with which the scene begins, added to the score at the time of Diaghilev's 1908 Paris production). Were the cut to be taken, this section would indeed conform to the content of the Moldenhauer manuscript; in modern editions of this work, however, it is standard practice to publish all musical options, hence the published edition's *35bis*.

Rimsky-Korsakov's revisions of *Boris Godunov* began in 1892 with a reworking of the Coronation Scene; these revisions eventually extended to the entire opera, and they were completed only several years later, in May 1896. This (first) version, given its premiere at the St. Petersburg Conservatory on November 28 of that year, contained numerous cuts as well as the notoriously extensive reworking of Musorgsky's original material. The Coronation Scene was expanded, adding five measures to the original one hundred and eighty-four in the process. Musorgsky had originally used a transparent orchestration style in order to express the insincerity of the Russian people's celebration of their new tsar, Boris Godunov; Rimsky-Korsakov reworked this material into weightier and contrapuntally more complex textures, with an enlarged orchestral complement (to Musorgsky's original instrumentation Rimsky-Korsakov added a third clarinet, trumpet, and trombone, as well as a harp and additional percussion). By transforming the tone of the scene from one of resigned acceptance on the part of both Boris and the crowd to one of a spectacularly brilliant civic celebration, Rimsky-Korsakov effectively shifted the focus of the entire opera from the plight of the Russian people as a whole to the

workings of destiny upon a single individual. This procedure not only stood in total opposition to the way in which Musorgsky originally envisioned the work, but also served to diminish our psychological insight into the characters' personalities and motivations, and to undermine the dramatic impact of the entire opera.

In 1906 Rimsky-Korsakov returned to this first version and restored the cuts he had made, apparently going to the opposite extreme by composing new material to add to the score. For Diaghilev's 1908 Paris production, Rimsky-Korsakov added even more material to the opera, and especially to the Coronation Scene, which he still felt lacked sufficient drama and power. He inserted another forty measures before Boris's monologue at the center of the scene, and sixteen measures after it. This new material was included in the full score of Rimsky-Korsakov's second version of *Boris Godunov*, published by V. Bessel in 1908. About this second version Rimsky-Korsakov commented, with characteristic humility and lucidity, "Having arranged the new version of *Boris Godunov* I had not destroyed its original form, had not painted out the old frescoes forever. If ever the conclusion is arrived at that the original is better, worthier than my revision, then mine will be discarded and *Boris Godunov* will be performed according to the original score."⁹

One can find in Musorgsky's original version of the Coronation Scene all the essential elements of the composer's aesthetic principles--elements which retain their originality and brilliance even in Rimsky-Korsakov's versions. Musorgsky's novel harmonies are represented by his use of chords based on the augmented fourth to depict the pealing of the Kremlin bells at the beginning of the scene. The dramatic conflict present in the entire opera may also be embodied in the augmented fourth's harmonic ambiguity and instability. The episode is interrupted at its height by Prince Shuisky instructing the crowd to "glorify" their new tsar. The chorus's "Slava!" ["Glory!"], solidly in the key of C Major, is interrupted at the height of its celebration by Boris's soliloquy, suddenly shifting to the key of C Minor, a shift that effectively indicates the duality present in Boris's personality and that provides us with a first glimpse into his psyche, revealed more fully in the course of the opera. The C-Minor modality of this episode eventually modulates to the relative major key, E-flat, as Boris's perspective shifts from that of the individual--embodied in his own terror-filled premonitions--to that of his subjects, the Russian people, to whom he expresses his hopes for a happier future. A return to the C-Major "Slava!" chorus (the Moldenhauer manuscript reflects this point in Rimsky-Korsakov's score) ends the scene. Thus the Coronation Scene, composed of two episodes of an extrovert nature focusing on the people, and framing an individual's introvert monologue, sets up the basic conflicts on which rests the dramatic development of the entire opera: and the individual facing his own moral conscience.

¹ Letter to Liudmila Shestakova of July 30, 1868; see *The Musorgsky Reader*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda and Sergei Bertensson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), p. 112.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard Anthony Leonard, *A History of Russian Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 103.

⁵ Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, translated from the Russian by Judah A. Joffe (London: Eulenburg, 1974), p. 17.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 116-117.

⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 104.

⁹ Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, p. 407.