

OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

Vol. I, No. 4

April 1986

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REMINDER: Next scheduled meeting is Monday, April 14, at 7:00 p.m. in the Lounge of the Music Building.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This issue is the last of the series centered on BORIS GODUNOV. Subsequent issues will deal with the forthcoming summer opera, MADAME BUTTERFLY and other themes unless, of course, there are some unfinished matters about BORIS that need my attention. In case you have been wondering about my sources of information, trivia, notes about BORIS specifically, etc. the following should satisfy your curiosity: I read Opera News (Met Guild) regularly. I also subscribe to The Opera Quarterly. I read record album jackets, libretti, other magazines periodically (e.g. Fanfare, High Fidelity/Musical America). I own a number of books including the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Opera, Kobbe's Complete Opera Book, etc. The challenge of BORIS sent me to the library where I have referred to Platanov's Boris Godunov, Tsar of Russia; Cherniasky's Tsar and People; and Leyda and Bertensson's translation and editing of The Musorgsky* Reader (compilation of his letters and documents pertaining to his life); Barbour's translation with notes of Pushkin's Boris Godunov; Magarshack's Pushkin, a biography; and Brown (ed.) Musorgsky in Memoriam 1881-1981.

*Most scholars use this spelling, but it is commonly found as Mussorgsky or Moussorgsky.

REPORT OF SUPERS MEETING, MARCH 10

Unfortunately, Mona Shaw was unable to attend the meeting at the last moment, but we went on as scheduled under the guidance of Meg Sump. We had a good turnout (20). The group was taken on a tour of the scene shop and costume shops for BORIS with Margaret Wenk and Eleanore Bowers as guides and demonstrators. We returned to the Lounge and reviewed committee reports. Dwight Sump described the BORIS GODUNOV T-shirts, polo shirts and sweatshirts that are to be sold. Beaumont Glass described more details of the production and the roles being sung in BORIS. We learned that the cast will involve 125 persons on stage at different times (at rehearsals it seems as though all are present at once), the orchestra will have 80 plus, the crew 20 plus, and there will also be a TV crew from IPBN. The strike of the set will involve about 50 persons. Ticket sales are going well. The meeting adjourned with the usual refreshments.

ANNOUNCEMENTS, NEEDS

Door guards during dress rehearsals are urgently needed. This will require two persons each rehearsal night of April 20-23 and the performance nights of April 25-27. Volunteers contact Dwight Sump, 353-7428 (office).

Volunteers are needed to prepare suitable buffet foods for the strike operations. Contact Phyllis Evans (351-1617) or Marie Knapp (354-4020) who have agreed to work out the arrangements. The need here is for food preparers, not servers. The strikers will be working into the early a.m. hours.

AMPLIFICATION AND EXPLANATION

The Boris Scene composed by Tchaikovsky (see Newsletter No. 3) was based on the Fountain Scene (Marina and Dimitri) from Pushkin's drama. One might have guessed Tchaikovsky would be attracted to this setting of all the scenes of the play. His attempt was not held in high regard by Musorgsky and his circle. M. condemned it in a letter to Stasov (1872) about seven or eight years after Tchaikovsky composed it, writing: "Boris is beyond him."

Question was raised about the six unfinished operas by Musorgsky. It seems that only five are generally listed: The Marriage, Salambo, Fair at Sorochintzi, Khovanschina, and Mlada (this one rarely referred to). However, your editor in his delving through the Musorgsky Reader, found reference to another opera fragment. In 1870, Musorgsky received a six-page sketch of a libretto for an opera from V. Stasov (music critic and friend of M. and the other members of the "circle of five") to be called Boby. He was urged by Stasov to develop it: "...here are types [Stasov's underlining], humor, and poetry, and even tragedy--enough of everything, and the tasks are exactly fitted to your nature." The word Boby refers to a sort of recluse. Musorgsky did compose a divination scene for the new opera, about which Stasov wrote "...it's simply a miracle." M. later used this scene for Marfa's divination for Prince Golitzin in the opera Khovanschina and never got back to work on Boby. Stasov preserved the scenario among his papers.

THE ROLE OF THE SIMPLETON OR "HOLY FOOL"

As my final venture into the BORIS story I want to present material I have come across with respect the role of the simpleton or yurodivy. The yurodivy is a Russian religious phenomenon not precisely translatable. The yurodivy has the gift to see and hear what others know nothing about and tells the world about his insights. He does this in an intentionally paradoxical way, as in a sort of code. He originally may well have been a mental retardate in some sense, perhaps even demented, but in any case, he plays the fool, whether deliberately or innocently. The yurodivy go back to before the 15th century and are known to have endured until the 18th century. An analogous phenomenon, also developed in the middle ages outside Russia in Western Europe. The king's fool, or court jester, who was protected by the Church, served a similar role although he was not deemed to be a "simpleton." Other societies have known to protect the "idiot" who would speak nonsense, in riddles and without inhibition as if in some way the poor soul has been touched (in the head) by God. In the days of the

tsars before the 19th century the yurodivy were actually given the right to criticize authorities and be eccentric within limits. However, when the jester of Western Europe began to exceed the limits imposed on them, the Church clamped down on them and they were harshly treated if they transgressed. Clowns as we know them today developed out of the jesters having to change to survive under the newer restrictions and ultimately worked their way into the field of entertainment, a path the yurodivy never took. The fate of the yurodivy differed probably because they were never institutionalized (and therefore not controlled) as were the court jesters.

Giles Fletcher, the Englishman who visited Russia in the 16th Century and wrote about that country, its people, customs, religion, and political institutions, described the holy idiots as being taken as prophets and as men of great holiness which gave them "the liberty to speak what they list without any controlment." He described them as going about naked except for a "breech clout," many with an iron collar or chain about the neck, even in the cold Russian winter.

Fletcher made note of a Holy Fool known in the time of Ivan the Terrible: "[O]ne there was whom they called Basil (Vasili) that would take it upon him to reprove the old Emperor for all his cruelty and oppression done toward the people. His body they have translated into a sumptuous church near the Emperor's house in Moscow and have canonised him for a saint." The church is St. Basil's in Red Square (The Church of Vasili the Blessed).

Did Musorgsky see himself as sort of a yurodivy? He was regarded by his acquaintances as bizarre, untutored and unnatural with respect to both his behavior and his musical ideas and productions although considered creative. His language was thought to be eccentric and he was notorious for openly stating truths about the nature of life around him as he saw it. His colleagues criticized him for being "an idiot," "a lump of dough," "his brain was weak," he was called "empty-headed." Subsequent biographers noted that he seemed to have developed a defensive self-mockery and a bizarre sense of humor.

One may gain some insight into Musorgsky's regard of the yurodivy by examining how he changed Pushkin's characterization of this role. In the Puskin drama, the scene with the Simpleton takes place in the square before St. Basil's Church. Awaiting the procession of Boris and the Boyars, a group of boys beat the Simpleton, "Nicky," and steal his coin. Nicky beseeches Boris, as he passes by, to punish the boys by cutting their throats "like you cut the Tsarevich's throat." The Boyars, horrified, cry out for the Simpleton to be seized but Boris intervenes, "Leave him alone. Pray for me, poor Nicky." In the original 1869 version of his opera, Musorgsky used the St. Basil scene but adds a lament for the Fool to sing in which he bewails the fate of Russia and its people, a sequence not found in the Pushkin BORIS. In the 1872 revision of the opera, Musorgsky discarded the St. Basil scene but preserved the sequence of the boys and the Simpleton without Boris. He placed it in the Kromy Forest scene after the death of Boris, and moved the fool's lament to conclude the opera. What more poignant ending than to have the yurodivy express a view of the fate of a world gone mad! However, Rimsky-Korsakov in his wisdom, moved the Kromy scene back to precede the death of Boris. Is this better theater? Was Musorgsky the fool to have concluded otherwise?