

## Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* - A survey of the discography

There are around ninety recordings of *Boris Godunov*, of which I consider twenty-four here below. It is possibly the most performed Russian opera and certainly the most recorded; I have departed from my usual practice of including only complete recordings, first, because deciding what "complete" means can be problematic, and secondly because there are several recordings of extended excerpts of exceptional quality and interest to the collector. There are several live recordings which look tempting but I have not reviewed as I cannot listen to everything and have therefore mostly confined myself to studio versions. All sixteen studio recordings are reviewed below bar one; I have been unable to hear one from 1973 conducted by Naidenov, in which Bulgarian bass Nicolai Ghiuselev sings two of the principal bass roles. The remaining eight recordings are either excerpts or live in vintage or inadequate sound, and thus can only be supplementary to a main studio recommendation.

There are two major areas of contention: which version and which orchestration to choose? – and obviously those two factors overlap and can work in combination.

Essentially, there are two versions, the so-called "initial" of 1869 and the "definitive" of 1872 - and here I am lifting without apology from Wikipedia, as it summarises neatly: "the Original Version of 1869...was rejected for production by the Imperial Theatres, and the Revised Version of 1872...received its first performance in 1874 in Saint Petersburg.

*Boris Godunov* has seldom been performed in either of the two forms left by the composer, frequently being subjected to cuts, recomposition, re-orchestration, transposition of scenes, or conflation of the original and revised versions.

Several composers, chief among them Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov and Dmitri Shostakovich, have created new editions of the opera to "correct" perceived technical weaknesses in the composer's original scores. Although these versions held the stage for decades, Mussorgsky's individual harmonic style and orchestration are now valued for their originality, and revisions by other hands have fallen out of fashion."

I usually identify below which version has been used in the recording, or it will be obvious from the context. Some people consider Rimsky's re-orchestration to be an act of vandalism and will not countenance it but most collectors either like, are used to, or tolerate it, being unwilling to sacrifice hearing those great singers of the past who invariably sang the Rimsky version. Some complain that the Shostakovich version has more Shosty than Mussorgsky in it; I have not been able to hear what I believe is the only complete recording of it on CD on the Arkadia label and currently unavailable: a 1967 live performance from La Fenice, conducted by Miladinovic, performed in a mixture of Russian and Serbian (!) and starring Miroslav Changalovich, the same Boris as in the 1955 recording recently released on Decca Eloquence and reviewed below, and two more of the same cast members. I cannot say that sounds very enticing but there is also a 1972 studio recording of excerpts in the Shostakovich version sung in German, conducted by Herbert Kegel on the Berlin Classics label, available from Arkiv and on various download sites – but you may also hear excerpts on YouTube, including some very impressive beefed-up bells in the Prologue and a Boris in Theo Adam who sounds as if Wotan has dropped by.

In effect, however, the debate concerning which orchestration it is best to use is increasingly redundant now that what Mussorgsky originally wrote is the preferred and accepted norm. That original score was starker, rawer and more "modern" than the sensibilities of his own age could endure but "authenticity" is the preferred option today and it is now widely recognised that the "crudity" of the original is objectively aesthetically superior to Rimsky's well-meaning domestication of Mussorgsky's own, sparer, harmonically forward-looking score; Rimsky's is warmer and brighter than Mussorgsky's own deliberately claustrophobic, string-heavy orchestration. To be fair to Rimsky

Korsakov, he presciently stated, "If the time comes when the original is considered to be better and of greater value than my revision, then my version will be discarded and Boris will be given according to the original score." An air of disjointedness can hang over the original if it is not performed with sufficient conviction, but the discrete scenes themselves are so compelling and the sonorities of their orchestration so haunting, that modern audiences are prepared to overlook the very episodic nature of the work.

Mussorgsky's own libretto, based on Pushkin, is worthy of being heard in the original liquid, but also muscular, Russian, but the main reason why I have not considered performances in German, French or English is that they are generally not as good as those in Russian. I have, however, included here three early recordings of which one is wholly in Italian and two where all the cast sing in Italian and Boris sings in Russian, Italian being a language which sits well with virtually anything that can be sung; this also permits me to consider the work of three of the greatest basses ever to undertake the role of Boris: Chaliapin, Pinza and Kipnis.

I find that I am tolerant of almost any permutation of the various orchestrations and editions as long as the result coheres and gives pleasure. The twin-cores of any performance are the stirring crowd scenes and Boris' riveting monologues; a great singer-actor can convince regardless of the vehicle and Mussorgsky's treatment of the Russian people almost as an additional, composite character will make its impact in any version if the chorus, orchestra and conductor are up to it. *Boris Godunov* is one of a handful of operas like *La traviata*, *La bohème* which eschew the far-fetched and the supernatural, it mostly avoids importing those customary operatic tropes. The only such elements are the narration of miracles arising from the martyrdom of the child prince, when Shuisky hints at his incorruptibility and Pimen tells Boris about the restoration of a blind man's sight; Boris' vision of Dmitry's ghost, is surely meant to be perceived by the audience as a hallucinatory manifestation of his guilt rather than, for example, the supposedly real visitation by the Countess' ghost to Hermann in Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame*. (To be fair, *Eugene Onegin*, too, is entirely free of supernatural elements and is psychologically acute.)

A further innovation resides in its psychological and social realism: as well as having an historically-based plot centring on the usual power-struggles and machinations of the nobility, it provides a daring and highly politicised depiction of the lives and emotions of ordinary people, who are bullied, manipulated and repressed by the Imperial State and rogue elements in the Church, then themselves become a vengeful mob which persecutes others. All of this perhaps reflects Mussorgsky's dictum that "The past is in the present", but his allusions to then current abuses are sufficiently disguised as history to deflect the attention of, and potential censorship by, authority. The St Basil scene was omitted from Mussorgsky's second attempt to win the approval of the Imperial Theatre's Directorate Reading Committee for his opera to be staged precisely because the Simpleton's addressing of Boris as "Tsar Herod" was too overtly subversive; that powerful confrontation is now often restored, previously using the Ippolitov-Ivanov re-orchestration of that scene, but since the publication in 1975 by Oxford University Press of the complete critical complete edition by David Lloyd-Jones, that is now the complete and definitive score.

Despite being a great original, Mussorgsky was in fact riding a wave of renewed interest in Russian history which resulted in a spate of novels (by such as Tolstoy), plays and poems (led by Pushkin, for example) and operas on that subject, the latter beginning with Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar/Ivan Susanin* (describing events almost immediately after those of *Boris*) and including Rimsky's *The Maid of Pskov/Ivan the Terrible*, Borodin's *Prince Igor* and Tchaikovsky's *Oprichnik*.

The Polish scenes were essentially forced upon Mussorgsky in order to provide scope for a soprano and embrace the more conventional world of aristocratic and amorous intrigue more pleasing to contemporary audiences and thereby stageable, but the subject matter is still that of authentically Russian Realpolitik. Those scenes are not crucial to the integrity of the opera, as the productions of the

1869 first version illustrate, but they do provide another dramatic and historical dimension - and the opportunity for a belting extended tenor-soprano duet which I would be loath to lose. Likewise, it is perfectly possible to enjoy the opera with cuts and without the Kromy Forest or St Basil scenes. Some prefer it to conclude with the death of Boris, as in 1869, others with that Kromy Forest scene and the Simpleton bewailing "the woe of Russia" as per 1872; composite versions can make that choice. Conversely, the inclusion of everything Mussorgsky wrote can generate problems, such as imposing on the audience a sense of déjà vu by obliging them to watch the Simpleton both lose his kopek and sing his lament "Flow, flow, bitter tears!" twice. Of course, CDs and downloads permit us to edit and programme our own preferred versions, while some performing editions have included as much music as possible but made sense of the opera with a few, small, judicious cuts to avoid those duplications.

This is a huge, panoramic and unique work, providing the engrossing spectacle of individual actions played out against a backdrop of sweeping historical events couched in extraordinarily original music; no wonder that it inspires such admiration and affection in so many opera-goers' hearts.

### The Recordings

**Vincenzo Bellezza – 1928** (live; excerpts; mono) in Italian and Russian; Guild  
Orchestra - Covent Garden  
Chorus - Covent Garden

Boris - Fyodor Ivanovich Chaliapin  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Dino Borgioli  
Varlaam - Salvatore Baccaloni  
Shuisky - Angelo Bada  
Missail - Giuseppe Nessi  
Fyodor - Margherita Carosio  
Simpleton - Octave Dua  
Shchelkalov - Aristide Baracchi  
Lavitsky - Dennis Noble  
Chernikovsky - Aristide Baracchi

Chaliapin is the charismatic bass most associated with the role of Boris. Sadly, we have only excerpts here, not a complete recording – extended scenes it is true, amounting to some seventy minutes and giving us the core of opera in those scenes in which Boris appears, including the coronation, the Clock Scene, the death of Boris and Pimen's and Varlaam's arias. Chaliapin sings in Russian, the rest of the cast in Italian.

This disc was comprehensively [reviewed by my MWI colleague Jonathan Woolf](#) and I have little to add; it is an essential supplement for lovers of this opera, unless they are averse to Chaliapin's histrionics and want more restraint and fidelity to the score, as per assumptions by "singing" basses such as Reizen, Talvela and Ghiaurov.

**Ettore Panizza – 1939** (live radio broadcast; mono) in Italian; Naxos. The 40s Label  
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera  
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Boris - Ezio Pinza  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Charles Kullman  
Marina - Kerstin Thorborg  
Pimen - Nicola Moscona  
Varlaam - Norman Cordon  
Shuisky - Alessio De Paolis

Missail - Giordano Paltrinieri  
Rangoni - Leonard Warren  
Fyodor - Irra Petina  
Xenia - Marita Farell  
Hostess - Doris Doe  
Simpleton - Nicholas Massue  
Shchelkalov - George Cehanovsky

This is a surprisingly full performance of the Rimsky 1872 version which orders events so that we end with the death of Boris after the Kromy Forest scene; only the St Basil scene is missing. The sound as remastered is surprisingly good, too, for a recording eighty years old – really very listenable apart from a bit of occasional papery, twittery, background interference - and listen you should, to hear one of the great basses of the 20C singing a signature role, albeit that he sings the role in Italian. His rich, smooth bass with its quick vibrato is perfectly controlled in terms of phrasing and dynamics and he animates the Italian text feelingly. He sings his death scene on a thread of tone punctuated by sudden spasms of pain – very effective.

The quality of the singing here in general is such that you soon forget any slight sonic limitations as the rest of the cast is starry, too – look at the famous names; note the presence of a young Leonard Warren as a virile, distinctive Rangoni and Alessio De Paolis, the ultimate comprimario character tenor before Piero De Palma, as an obsequious, scheming Shuisky, George Cehanovsky is a light, elegant Shchelkalov, Nicola Moscona a sonorous Pimen, Charles Kullman a strong, clean-voiced, if slightly lachrymose, Grigori/Dmitri/Pretender. Norman Cordon's Varlaam is a bit agricultural but amusing enough; the role is hardly subtle. Met stalwart Doris Doe is a good Hostess, the Xenia sweet and pretty, the Nurse warm-voiced and steady and the great Wagnerian contralto/mezzo Kerstin Thorborg revels in wrapping her big, warm voice around Marina's capricious outbursts. The chorus is sometimes rather distant but that lends atmosphere to their contribution offstage in Pimen's monastery and they still make an impact in the mob scenes.

Panizza was a Toscanini contemporary and clone with regard to conducting style: swift, driven and precise.

I can recommend this only as a supplement but recommend it I do, not only for the beauty of Pinza's singing but for the excellent ensemble.

(The Naxos issue of this performance has three CDs with a total timing of 249 minutes, whereas The 40s Label issue, also well remastered using the Cedar Sound System, misses out the radio commentary and fits it onto two.)

**George Szell – 1943** (live; mono; 13/2/43; Kipnis) in Italian and Russian; The Fourties; Walhall; excerpts:  
Music &Arts  
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera  
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Boris - Alexander Kipnis  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - René Maison  
Marina - Kerstin Thorborg  
Pimen - Nicola Moscona  
Varlaam - Norman Cordon  
Shuisky - Alessio De Paolis  
Missail - John Dudley  
Rangoni - Leonard Warren  
Fyodor - Irra Petina

Xenia - Marita Farell  
Hostess - Doris Doe  
Simpleton - John Garris

The vintage sound here is really quite good, even allowing for some inevitable distortion. Kipnis is in magisterial voice in this, his Met debut as Boris. His singing makes you realise why there is a small cadre of elite Boris singers to which only those such as he belong; his power and resonance are formidable and he employs a wide range of vocal colours in his vivid impersonation of the conflicted Tsar. However, be aware that as with the first recording made by Chaliapin, Kipnis sings in Russian while the rest of the cast sing in Italian, being the language of the Met production in which Pinza shared the eponymous leading role this and the following year – so we have “Gloria!” not “Slava!” in the Coronation Scene. As per the 1939 performance above, the cast is stellar, with the same principal singers except, obviously, for the Boris and René Maison replacing Charles Kullman. Szell's accompaniment is as alert, precise and pointed as you would expect. Despite all its merits, the language mix means that this cannot be a prime recommendation, only a fascinating curiosity and a record of one of the greatest Borises.

This is obviously comparable to the preceding recording with Pinza and there isn't much to choose between them, as both have great basses in the principal role and both have language issues for the modern listener, so, for that reason and reasons of sound, make good supplementary recommendations.

(The two-disc set is hard to find but there are 76 minutes of excerpts on a single disc from Music & Arts offering the best of Kipnis' contribution from the complete performance, and also 40 minutes of studio-recorded excerpts from Kipnis on the RCA recital disc below. Interestingly, the Music & Arts cover claims that the performance uses Shostakovich orchestration completed in 1940, which is darker than Rimsky's but fuller than Mussorgsky's own, using more brass, but my understanding is that the partial world premiere of that version was given by Kipnis in 1944 when he sang three scenes with the New York Philharmonic under Fritz Reiner and to me this sounds like the regular Rimsky orchestration.)

**Nicolai Berezowsky – 1945** (excerpts; studio; mono) RCA

Orchestra - RCA Victor Orchestra

Chorus - Robert Shaw Chorale

Boris - Alexander Kipnis  
Varlaam - Alexander Kipnis  
Shuisky - Ilya Tamarin

There are only just over forty minutes of excerpts here but they are sung in Russian and preserve one of the great Borises in much better sound than the live Met performance above – and Varlaam's aria for good measure, too – Kipnis had sung that role to Chaliapin's Boris twenty years earlier. Whoever the “Victor Chorale” and the “Victor Symphony Orchestra” are – presumably drawn from New York regulars at the Met, the Philharmonic or the NBC – the small choir under Robert Shaw and the orchestra under Berezowsky are both admirable; really sharp and energised. Tamarin makes a smooth, characterful Shuisky. Kipnis is phenomenal, hardening his voice for the Varlaam aria then for Boris re-imposing his renowned combination of bel canto style with searing dramatic declamation. His “Chur, chur, ditja!” (“Away, away, child”) in the Clock Scene and his death agonies are chilling.

(The remaining thirty minutes of the programme consists of Russian songs and arias from celebrated operas.)

**Nikolai Golovanov - 1948-49** (studio; mono) Arkadia; Lyrica

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Boris - Mark Reizen

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Georgi Nelepp

Marina - Maria Maksakova

Pimen - Maxim Mikhailov

Varlaam - Vassily Lubenchov

Shuisky - Nikander Khanayev

Missail - Vassili Yakuschenko

Rangoni - Aleksey Petrovich Ivanov

Fyodor - Bronislava Zlatogorova

Xenia - Yelena Dimitrievna Kruglikova

Hostess - Alexandra Tourtchina

Simpleton - Ivan Kozlovsky

Shchelkalov - Ilya Bogdanov

Krushchov - Alexander Peregudov

Nurse - Eugenia Verbitskaya

Nikitich - Sergei Krasovsky

Mityukha - Ivan Sipayev

This two CD set is the 1948 recording made with Mark Reizen who was, in my opinion, the greatest Russian bass – even better than Chaliapin. It has the same cast as the one recorded a year later with Pirogov, who is undoubtedly gripping and more overtly histrionic than Reizen but vocally less secure - especially in pitch. Both are in historic mono but perfectly acceptable and it is worth the sacrifice in sound to hear such extraordinarily vivid and idiomatic performances - and some would argue that the period sound adds an archaic atmosphere and verisimilitude to these absorbing accounts. Some editions run to three discs and include the St Basil scene recorded later by Reizen with Nebolsin conducting, but that is missing on this two-disc set. Still another 3 CD issue on Preiser gives you the complete Pirogov recording with all the scenes from this set featuring Boris as recorded here by Reizen as a bonus - but no St Basil. Make your choice!

This set is missing not only the St Basil scene but the first scene of the Act 3, so the first Polish scene has gone and Rangoni is completely missing. There are also the "standard" cuts to the Pimen scene and the second act, although extras from the 1872 revision, such as the Hostess's "grey drake" song and the folk songs sung by the Nurse are grafted in. We do also get a concluding Kromy Forest scene, rather than ending with the death of Boris, so this is a patchwork which borrows some of the highlights from the 1872 version.

There are no weaknesses in the cast who are all Bolshoi regulars of the period. Particularly worthy of note - after Reizen's magisterial Boris, of course - are the great Georgy Nelepp as Grigory, Nikhander Khanayev as Shuisky and the grand baritone Ilya Bogdanov as Shechelkalov. Maksim Mikhailov's Pimen is wondrously grave and sonorous; Reizen also recorded Pimen and Varlaam later but it is more satisfying to avoid the aural treble-takes Christoff causes us in his two tours de force, and to have different, top quality Russian basses in those three roles. Finally, one should not pass over the haunting, liquid-voiced Simpleton of that great Russian tenor Ivan Kozlovsky in a classic assumption of the role.

This should perhaps be only a supplementary recording for reasons of the sound and the edition (if I may dignify it with such a word); real aficionados will want the Gergiev five-disc set with both versions and Mussorgsky's original orchestration, one of Christoff's hugely entertaining but almost inexcusably self-aggrandising, multi-role sets (I marginally prefer the earlier Dobrowen over the Cluytens), and

perhaps another Rimsky version such as George London in the eponymous role - either his superb highlights disc conducted by Schippers or the 1963 full recording, when he was marginally less steady but still very impressive.

**Nikolai Golovanov – 1949** (studio; mono) Opera d'Oro; Preiser

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Boris - Aleksandr Stepanovich Pirogov

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Georgi Nelepp

Marina - Maria Maksakova

Pimen - Maxim Mikhailov

Varlaam - Vassily Lubenchov

Shuisky - Nikander Khanayev

Missail - Vassili Yakuschenko

Rangoni - Aleksey Petrovich Ivanov

Fyodor - Bronislava Zlatogorova

Xenia - Yelena Dimitrievna Kruglikova

Hostess - Alexandra Tourtchina

Simpleton - Ivan Kozlovsky

Shchelkalov - Ilya Bogdanov

Krushchov - Alexander Peregudov

Nurse - Eugenia Verbitskaya

Nikitich - Sergei Krasovsky

Mityukha - Ivan Sipayev

Please see above for the differences between this and the version starring Mark Reizen; they are essentially the same recording apart from the casting of Boris.

**Leopold Stokowski – 1952** (excerpts; studio; mono) Cala

Orchestra - San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - San Francisco Opera

Boris - Nicola Rossi-Lemeni

Pimen - Nicola Rossi-Lemeni

Varlaam - Nicola Rossi-Lemeni

Fyodor - Robert Cauwet

Simpleton - Lawrence Mason

The remastered mono sound here is excellent for its era but unfortunately lacks the spaciousness the modern listener needs to appreciate this wonderful, epic music fully. Nonetheless, the cathedral bells and blasts of brass in the Prologue preceding the Coronation Scene are mightily impressive - enough to send shivers up the spine, especially when the conductor is Stokowski, with his vivid sense of drama and ability to enhance orchestral colours and balances. The San Francisco orchestra and chorus are both magnificent and Stokowski has the Boris of his day, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, before his bass became woolly and rocky - and who had sung the title role to acclaim at the opera under him the year before and again the same year as this concert performance.

Stokowski didn't conduct a lot of opera, comparatively speaking, but some of his live and studio opera recordings are classics: the extracts from *Samson et Dalila*, the legendary *Turandot* with Corelli and Nilsson and the Wagner orchestral excerpts - as per here - and symphonic syntheses from the operas are treasurable. The slight flutter in Rossi-Lemeni's bass is not out of place given the emotionalism of his delivery of the text - he had the advantage of a Russian mother and an Italian father - and even if

he lacks the really black, resonant sound of the greatest Borises, his is still a mightily impressive assumption, tormented and histrionic, matching the verve and vigour of Stokowski's direction and the attack of the chorus. For good measure, he sings Varlaam's Song with rollicking gusto as well as Boris' four, great tortured - arias, shall we call them? His delivery during Boris' hallucinatory vision of the murdered Tsarevich is riveting, chilling and really quite extraordinary. The half a dozen choral extracts are extensive and varied, and make up a good proportion of this very well filled CD - eighty minutes of music, heartily endorsed as a supplement.

**Issay Dobrowen – 1952** (studio; mono) EMI; Brilliant; Naxos; Membran  
Orchestra - Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion Française  
Chorus - Choeurs Russes de Paris

Boris - Boris Christoff  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Nicolai Gedda  
Marina - Eugenia Zareska  
Pimen - Boris Christoff  
Varlaam - Boris Christoff  
Shuisky - Andre Bielecki  
Missail - Andre Bielecki  
Rangoni - Kim Borg  
Fyodor - Eugenia Zareska  
Xenia - Ludmilla Lebedeva  
Hostess - Lydia Romanova  
Simpleton - Wassili Pasternak  
Shchelkalov - Kim Borg

The problem with this recording has never been with the sound – which is remarkably full, so much so that it matters little that it is mono – or with its musicality – it is splendidly conducted by Dobrowen directing an inspired French orchestra, even if the enthusiastic White Russian chorus is a bit ragged – or with the supporting cast, which includes first-rate singers such as rich-voiced, under-recorded mezzo Eugenia Zareska, assured bass Kim Borg and a young, fresh Nicolai Gedda – but with “the indefensibly self-aggrandising” undertaking of all three principal bass roles by Boris Christoff. His voice is so beautiful and his artistry so great that many will not mind the anomaly of his having to duet with himself when Pimen meets Tsar Boris, and four other cast members double up on roles – or in André Bielecki's case, he sings three – but that is common practice in studio recordings for obvious economic reasons and doesn't much matter if clashes of the Pimen-Boris kind do not occur. The trouble is that Christoff's voice is so instantly recognisable that he can't do much to disguise it except sing softly and perhaps a little too monochromatically as Pimen, then whoop it up as Varlaam – but the singing is always mesmerising.

I still love this recording and it will have been the introduction for many to this opera. Rimsky's orchestration sounds as energised and hard-edged as it can do and the chorus' exuberance is apt for depicting the populace. Christoff's portrayal of the tormented Boris grabs the listener by the throat from his first notes and makes one realise how bland are some other vocally successful but, dramatically, comparatively inert assumptions of the role. You have to hear it, either here or in the later stereo version under Cluytens.

**Kresimir Baranovich – 1955** (studio; mono) Decca Eloquence  
Orchestra - Belgrade National Opera  
Chorus - Belgrade National Opera

Boris - Miroslav Changalovich  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Miro Branjnik



Marina - Melanie (Mila) Bugarinovic  
 Pimen - Branko Pivnichki  
 Varlaam - Zarko Cvejic  
 Shuisky - Stephan Andrashevich  
 Missail - Stepan Vukashevich  
 Fyodor - Sofiya Jankovic  
 Xenia - Zlata Sesardich  
 Hostess - Biserka Kaluchich  
 Simpleton - Nicola Janchich  
 Shchelkalov - Dushan Popovich

This is the third issue in the series of seven operas recorded by Decca in Croatia in 1955 and its first issue on CD. Of course, this is the Rimsky version, which was the norm until the sentiment swung back towards performing the opera more or less the way Mussorgsky left it; Karajan's superb recording headed by Ghiaurov made in 1970 used Rimsky and Mark Ermler's, made as late as 1985, was still using the Rimsky/Ippolitov-Ivanov orchestration, but in 1976 Semkow's Boris, starring Talvela, had for the first time in a studio recording used the original bleaker, balder instrumentation. If you want everything Mussorgsky wrote then Gergiev's 5 CD set on Philips offering the 1869 original and the 1872 revision remains fascinating and indispensable, but some still prefer Rimsky's richer realisation – which is almost a different opera.

I find I can enjoy any version if it is well performed and while the inclusion of the St Basil scene is welcome, its omission is not so detrimental to our pleasure and you will not find it here, so there is no confrontation between the Simpleton and Boris outside the cathedral. However, we do get to meet the Simpleton in the Kromy Forest scene, which is here placed at the beginning of Act 4 and is given a rousing account. The first scene of the Polish Act is cut, so we get only the scene between Grigori and Marina in the castle gardens – no Rangoni. That rump of the Polish scene is in fact one of the best passages in this recording and makes me wish we could have had the whole thing.

Although the Belgrade opera had some fine singers on its roster, it is surely too much to expect this recording to come up to the standards of the best Bolshoi and prestige-label releases, especially as subsequent studio recordings starred more incontrovertibly great basses like George London, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Martti Talvela and Evgeny Nesterenko. Only Boris Christoff accomplished the extraordinary and egotistical feat of singing all three major bass roles in one recording not once but twice; here the casting is conventional, with three different basses. I was not at all surprised to see the name of Žarko Cvejić as Varlaam, as in my previous review of Prince Igor from the same stable I described him in the dual roles of Galitsky and Konchak, as “no Boris Christoff; he is frequently hoarse, coarse and unsteady – but he certainly sounds the part of a drunken, lecherous reprobate” and in my review of *Kovanshchina* I call his Prince Ivan “rough” and say it “could be steadier”. The Dosifey there, Miroslav Čangalović, sings the eponymous lead role here; he is firm and expressive and has an essentially beautiful voice but I do not find him to be especially charismatic or individual, and at times I would like to hear more weight in his bass. He provides some imaginative interpretative touches, such as the nice sneer on “Aha! Shuisky Knyaz!” and delivers a good Clock Scene, full of terror and hysteria, and his death is powerfully and feelingly narrated but I cannot say that he always rivets my attention on his singing in the manner of the best exponents of the role.

You may hear from the very opening that the mono sound is rather thin, boxy and distant; disappointing, as it seems that the change in recording location from Belgrade to Zagreb meant that the engineering reverted to mono rather than the stereo we had for the previous two recordings and obviously the crowd scenes suffer, despite the commitment of the chorus. You may also hear that the orchestra is not the finest, but the raw, squawking oboes create a suitably disconcerting introduction to the enforced supplication from the lusty crowd to Boris to accept the throne and the coronation bells are effective. Dušan Popović sings strongly and sensitively as Shchelkalov.

Pimen is recorded much more closely than the Prologue which gives his scene more intimacy. Branko Pivnički does not have the most distinguished of basses, but he's resonant, avuncular and competent, if a bit lumpy. The Pretender, Miroslav Brajnik, has a vibrant, incisive tenor which neatly suggests Grigori's fanaticism. Melanija Bugarinović's Marina makes only a brief appearance but her Wagnerian mezzo-soprano makes quite an impact and the concluding duet with Grigori is a belter. The Hostess is lively and characterful; the Simpleton suitably plangent and poignant; the conducting throughout is unobtrusive – except for Baranović's audible groans! - and well-paced.

For all that there are some good things in this recording, I cannot really see why it has claims above the many others in better sound with a more consistently arresting cast.

**Thomas Schippers – 1961** (excerpts; stereo) Sony

Orchestra - Columbia Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Chorus

Boris - George London

Shuisky - Howard Fried

Fyodor - Mildred Allen

Krushchov - Stanley Kolk

This is a record on which everything works: the performances, the engineering, the programming - and, *mirabile dictu*, all at a bargain price.

If you do not have George London's complete 1963 recording of *Boris*, these excerpts of his finest role, honed to perfection over ten years until it became one of the most affecting and spine-chilling characterisations of the tortured tsar you could ever wish to hear, form an excellent alternative. It is no surprise to learn that London was Birgit Nilsson's favourite singing partner; that magnificent bass-baritone encompasses every facet of the more complex 1872 version of Boris (in Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration, of course - not that that matters). He fines his huge voice down for the tender moments, inflects the words with groans and cries without offending musicality and is truly frightening in his anguished delusions. (Is it too fanciful to remark that, given that London died prematurely from heart disease, there is a poignant, proleptic significance in the authenticity of London's acting of Boris' collapse and death?) The liner notes are a charming, informative and perceptive essay by London himself; I only wish space had been found for a libretto. I certainly do not find his interpretation inferior as a performance to that of such distinguished colleagues as Christoff or Talvela.

**André Cluytens – 1962** (studio; stereo) EMI;

Orchestra - Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (Paris)

Chorus - Sofia National Opera

Boris - Boris Christoff

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Dimiter Uzunov

Marina - Evelyn Lear

Pimen - Boris Christoff

Varlaam - Boris Christoff

Shuisky - John Lanigan

Missail - Milen Paunov

Rangoni - Anton Diakov

Fyodor - Ana Alexieva

Xenia - Ekterina Georgieva

Hostess - Mira Kalin

Simpleton - Kiril Dulgerov

Shchelkalov - Jacques Mars  
Krushchov - Vasil Benchev  
Nurse - Melanie Bugarinovic  
Lavitsky - Jacques Mars  
Chernikovsky - Kostadine Scherkerlisky

If you want to hear Boris Christoff repeat his triple-assumption of Pimen, Varlaam and Boris that he first gave under Dobrowen, then this later recording presents some advantages, including stereo sound and a deepening of what was already a searching portrayal of the Tsar on Christoff's part, his having sung the role on stage for so many years. Cluytens' conducting is not inferior to Dobrowen's but perhaps more nuanced than exciting and the supporting cast is generally very strong. However, there are also some caveats: Christoff is understandably not in quite such fresh voice as ten years earlier, Dimiter Uzunov is rather harsh compared with Gedda and the Xenia is shrill. Otherwise there is little to choose between the two Christoff recordings and I am equally happy listening to either, although I prize the better sound and enhanced subtleties of this second version.

In this I agree with [my MWI colleague Tony Haywood who reviewed this](#) as long ago as 2002.

**Alexander Melik-Pasheyev – 1962** (studio; stereo) Melodiya

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre  
Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Boris - Ivan Petrov  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vladimir Ivanovsky  
Marina - Irina Arkhipova  
Pimen - Mark Reshetin  
Varlaam - Alexey Geleva  
Shuisky - Georgi Shulpin  
Missail - Nikolai Zakharov  
Rangoni - Yevgeny Kibkalo  
Fyodor - Valentina Klepatskaya  
Xenia - Tamara Sorokina  
Hostess - Vera Ivanova Borisenko  
Simpleton - Anton Grigoriev  
Shchelkalov - Aleksey Petrovich Ivanov

This is mostly the Rimsky orchestration, but the St. Basil's scene is the Ippolitov-Ivanov version and ends with the Kromy Forest scene. The stereo sound is excellent for its era, vivid with minimal hiss. Petrov is a "singing Boris" – in other words, like Reizen and Ghiaurov, inclined to play down the histrionics and adhere more rigorously to the score than an "acting Boris" in the Chaliapin-Christoff tradition. He is wholly satisfying but some might want a little more in terms of impact, which is what the more demonstrative and even more impressively vocally endowed George London brings to the role the following year following his Bolshoi breakthrough. Ivanov as Shchelkalov is another of those clean-voiced, first-rate baritones which come out of Russia and I have never heard anything by Arkhipova which is not superlative.

As you might expect with Melik-Pashayev at the helm, the singing and conducting have a wholly authentic Russian feeling: intense, vivid, slightly febrile, always with a suppressed energy waiting to burst out. Nobody could be disappointed with this recording yet I am drawn even more to the special vocal quality of George London in the re-make – indeed, some of this recording was re-used there.

**Alexander Melik-Pasheyev - 1962-63** (studio; stereo) Sony

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Boris - George London

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vladimir Ivanovsky

Marina - Irina Arkhipova

Pimen - Mark Reshetin

Varlaam - Alexei Gueleva

Shuisky - Georgi Shulpin

Missail - Nikolai Zakharov

Rangoni - Yevgeny Kibkalo

Fyodor - Maria Mitukova

Xenia - Elisabeta Shumskaya

Hostess - Vera Ivanova Borisenko

Simpleton - Anton Grigoriev

Shchelkalov - Aleksey Petrovich Ivanov

Nurse - Eugenia Verbitskaya

Everything I say above about the first studio recording by Melik-Pashayev applies here and the cast is almost the same but with new a Xenia and Fyodor; the big difference is in the casting of the first non-Russian to sing Boris at the Bolshoi in George London, who replaces Ivan Petrov here in a recording dating from May 1963. Petrov is a fine singer with an imposing and impressive bass; arguably but London takes the portrayal to an even higher level dramatically speaking; however, his vocal troubles are just about to manifest themselves, so he is not quite as steady as he was for Schippers two years earlier in the excerpts disc. Nonetheless, I hear few signs of decline; he more animated than Petrov and riveting in his monologues; you have no choice other than to believe him when he proclaims, "My soul is sad" and the beauty of his vocalism demands our empathy, even for a tyrant. Even lesser or unknown names here, such as Yevgeny Kibkalo's Rangoni, prove to be captivating. Ivanovsky has a typically bright, Russian-sounding which is by no means unsuitable for Grigory and Mark Reshetin's big, gravelly bass makes an authoritative Pimen. Anton Grigoriev is a plaintive, pathetic Simpleton; his confrontation of Boris as a "Herod" is very effective. The Varlaam is a bit hoarse and growly and yells; there are better. As is so often the case with the casting of Xenia, the distinguished soprano Shumskaya is here rather shrill. Ample compensation is at hand with Arkhipova's vibrant Marina; her duet with Ivanovsky which evolves into a brief, climactic trio is, as so often with this music, a highlight.

Despite some incidental flaws. few recordings gel as well as this in ensemble yet also feature a truly magnetic, vocally superlative Boris like George London here.

**Herbert von Karajan – 1966** (live; mono) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Boris - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Alexei Maslennikov

Marina - Sena Jurinac

Pimen - Kim Borg

Varlaam - Anton Diakov

Shuisky - Gerhard Stolze

Missail - Milen Paunov

Rangoni - Zoltán Kéléman

Fyodor - Gertrude Jahn

Xenia - Nadejda Dobrianova

Hostess - Margarita Lilowa  
 Simpleton - Gerhard Stolze  
 Shchelkalov - Sabin Markov  
 Krushchov - Zvonimir Prelcec  
 Nurse - Mariana Radev  
 Nikitich - Tugomir Franc  
 Lavitsky - Siegfried Rudolf Frese  
 Chernikovsky - Paul Karolidis

I am surprised, given the quality of sound on this recording, that Opera d'Oro has seen fit to re-issue it under their "Grand Tier" de luxe label. It has long been available in their standard series but has drawn some justifiably acerbic comments regarding the muddiness and inconsistency of sound, with virtually no higher frequencies and ensembles dissolving into mush. Individual voices fare better but this still sounds more like a poor amateur recording than the usual acceptable mono radio broadcast. Most of Act 3 is horribly muffled.

Furthermore, only four years later Karajan made an excellent studio recording of this opera for Decca with many of the same cast, using the fuller, later, 1908 revision by Rimsky-Korsakov; here Karajan streamlines the opera, using mostly Rimsky-Korsakov's first version from 1896 but also makings some large cuts, including Pimen's first narrative and he rather perversely swaps the order of certain scenes, so that the scene in Pimen's cell precedes the Novodievichy Square scene and the last two scenes are reversed, such that Kromy Forest precedes the death of Boris. This might be said to conclude the opera more dramatically but it also undermines Mussorgsky's intention to switch the audience's attention back to people, who in themselves constitute a major character in this opera. It also subverts the pathos of giving the last word to the Simpleton. I am thus mystified as to why anyone would see this live performance as more desirable than the 1970 studio recording, given the cuts, tinkering and its gross sonic inferiority.

A case might, however, be made for the enhanced drama of a live occasion and more energy in Karajan's direction yet tempi are only marginally slower in the Decca recording and it in any case provides so much more clarity and detail that the comparison becomes otiose. Another claim is that Nicolai Ghiaurov is fresher and more animated live in 1966. I hear little difference; we are talking about only four years when he was still in his absolute prime, singing perhaps his greatest role under a conductor who rarely revised his approach to a score once he had worked it out to his satisfaction. Again, a preference could be expressed for the darker-voiced Marina of Sena Jurinac over that of a slightly squally Vishnevskaya but both are excellent. Anton Diakov's Varlaam is a distinct liability in 1966: he is harried by Karajan's excessive briskness in his narration about Ivan the Terrible in the town of Kazan and bawls his way through it horribly sharp; things go better with him at a less hectic pace in the studio recording. Otherwise, apart from where the roles are taken by the same singers, the differences amount to a game of swings and roundabouts: both Finnish basses Kim Borg and Martti Talvela (himself a notable Boris) are imposing as Pimen, Zoltán Kéléman reprises his oily, menacing Rangoni, and a slightly effortful but heroic Ludovic Spiess marks an improvement on Alexei Maslennikov, who was promoted to Grigori by Karajan in Salzburg but is happier reverting to the Simpleton for Decca.

Oddly, Opera d'Oro does not provide the full cast list so I have supplemented it above by recourse to another source. I advise that having a libretto is not so much welcome as vital to Anglophones. I do not see a strong case for preferring this live Salzburg version over the later studio recording. Although Karajan's "sables and diamonds" approach to the score has been criticised as too opulent, for me, he and Ghiaurov still manage to bring out the searing drama of this epic opera in both versions. The difference is that in 1970 you can hear it properly.

**Herbert von Karajan – 1970** (stereo; studio) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoperchor - Sofia Radio Chorus - Wiener Singerknaben

Boris - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Ludovic Spiess

Marina - Galina Vishnevskaya

Pimen - Martti Talvela

Varlaam - Anton Diakov

Shuisky - Alexei Maslennikov

Missail - Milen Paunov

Rangoni - Zoltán Kéléman

Fyodor - Olivera Miljakovic

Xenia - Nadejda Dobrianova

Hostess - Margarita Lilowa

Simpleton - Alexei Maslennikov

Shchelkalov - Sabin Markov

Rimsky-Korsakov's rescoring undeniably negates some of the terrible suffering in Mussorgsky's masterpiece by smoothing over the rawness of the composer's original orchestration and reducing it to a series of striking tableaux - rather like many of Rimsky's own operas. Additionally, the careful profundity of Karajan's interpretation to some degree also undermines its dramatic impact; it is doubtful whether we really want the burnished beauty of the VPO strings rather than the jagged dynamism of a real Russian orchestra such as plays the score for Ermler in his Bolshoi recording with a Boris in Nesterenko of similar amplitude and majesty to Ghiaurov's superb assumption here. Indeed, if you really want the Rimsky orchestration, I think that Bolshoi recording remains the first choice even over this magnificent version by virtue of its authentic bite and propulsiveness. Nonetheless, I wouldn't want to be without Ghiaurov's tortured Tsar; those who hear an under-characterised Boris aren't really listening to the subtlety of Ghiaurov's snarling, "Akha, Shuisky knyaz!"; it is a masterpiece of barely controlled rage and contempt. Likewise, his demented agony in the clock scene following Shuisky's narrative concerning the dead princeling Dimitri is immensely powerful and convincing. Of course, the smooth beauty of his bass is never in question and he isn't as overtly histrionic as some predecessors but it is a real singer-actor's performance.

The supporting cast, while not always as striking, is often superb, as with Talvela's equally restrained and nuanced Pimen, and is never less than adequate, even if certain roles, such as the Shchelkalov of Sabin Markov, are palely sung in comparison with exponents such as Vassily Gerello for Gergiev. Spiess is rather good as the Pretender, the strenuous, near-hysterical note in his tenor entirely apt for the part. Kéléman's oleaginous Rangoni is smoothly and elegantly sung, Vishnevskaya, dramatically pointed and impassioned as Marina, is more comfortable at this stage of her career in the mezzo tessitura, still having enough lower register to do the role justice and mostly eschewing the dreaded Slavic wobble up top.

While I still esteem Christoff's tour de force for Dobrown and recommend Gergiev's 5 CD double-bill of the 1869 and 1872 versions as first choice, there is much to enjoy in this carefully wrought, exquisitely played version by Karajan in 1970. The conductor grunts and groans throughout and is obviously feeling every moment of the score; this is no slick, superficial run-through even if it occasionally lacks visceral impact and flirts with some ponderous tempi. I really like the way he brings out the colours and textures of Rimsky's "illicit" orchestration; his approach is rich and deep, not superficial.

Devotees of Ghiaurov need not hesitate, nor need you fear that Karajan is too effete. Furthermore, we get the St Basil and Kromy Forest scenes, so this is a musically complete version - as long as you enjoy

Rimsky's sanitised orchestration. Personally, I want enough versions to be able to experience this great opera in its various guises and hear the eponymous title-role sung by as many great basses as possible, so this recording featuring Ghiaurov takes its place alongside my other favourites: Reizen, London, Christoff and Nesterenko while the Gergiev survey - starring Putilin and Vaneev as Boris in the earlier and later versions respectively and both very fine - remains equally indispensable both for artistic and musicological reasons.

The latest "DG Originals" remastering has removed the harshness apparent in the earlier CD issue.

**Jerzy Semkow – 1976** (stereo; studio) EMI

Orchestra - Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Polish Radio Chorus Cracow - Cracow Philharmonic Boys' Chorus

Boris - Martti Talvela

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Nicolai Gedda

Marina - Bozena Kinasz

Pimen - Leonard Mróz

Varlaam - Aage Haugland

Shuisky - Bogdan Paprocki

Missail - Kazimierz Pustelak

Rangoni - Andrzej Hiolski

Fyodor - Vera Baniewicz

Xenia - Halina Lukomska

Hostess - Stefania Toczyska

Simpleton - Paulos Raptis

This was a brave recording of the original, non-Rimsky-fied version of *Boris* when listeners were still not acclimatised to the starker orchestration and more adventurous harmonies that Mussorgsky intended. It has many virtues, not least the great Talvela in a role tailor-made for his massive bass. He gives us a deeply felt Boris without resorting to the admittedly effective but increasingly unfashionable histrionics typical of his predecessors; his Tsar is more akin to the characterisation we hear from such as Nesterenko. There are other lesser-known but equally commanding singers in the cast, especially the immensely dignified and moving Pimen of Leonard Mroz and the splendidly subtle double act by Andrzej Hiolski as both Shchelkalov and Rangoni; his slightly husky baritone is a delight, oddly reminiscent of Italian baritone Mario Sereni, elegant and expressive. The Marina, too, is wonderfully vibrant and passionate, although I admit to never having heard of Bozena Kinasz. The Polish supporting cast, chorus and orchestra are fine, the latter making an especially warm sound in the strings in particular. The sound is excellent following the re-mastering.

I admit to being less enthusiastic than previous reviewers about Gedda's Dmitri or Semkow's conducting. Gedda is elegant but always a bit throaty and constricted, especially in comparison with his Marina's huge, released sound; Gedda comes close to yelling in their big duet, just, I suspect, to keep up with her. Semkow is subtle but I find that he generates little excitement at key points; everything is very restrained and well-mannered but I need more raw Russian attack. For instance, his pulse verges on the slack in the great "Slava" chorus concluding the Prologue and during Boris's death. Nor am I ever much of a fan of Aage Haugland's clumsy, unsteady bass, although he is amusing whooping it up as the drunk monk Varlaam.

In short, this is a fine *Boris* but not necessarily preferable to recordings of the original version such as that by Gergiev with the Kirov. It is cheap but comes without a libretto, which is essential to Western listeners.

**Vladimir Fedoseyev - 1978-1983** (studio; stereo) Philips

Orchestra - USSR TV and Radio Large Chorus - «Spring» Studio Children's Chorus

Chorus - USSR TV and Radio Large Symphony Orchestra

Boris - Alexander Verdernikov

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vladislav Piavko

Marina - Irina Arkhipova

Pimen - Vladimir Matorin

Varlaam - Artur Eisen

Shuisky - Andrei Sokolov

Missail - Anatoly Mishutin

Rangoni - Yuri Mazurok

Fyodor - Glafira Koroleva

Xenia - Elena Shkolnikova

Hostess - Lyudmila Simonova

Simpleton - Janis Sporgis

Shchelkalov - Alexander Voroshilo

Krushchov - Yuri Elnikov

Nurse - Nina Grigorieva

Nikitich - Vladimir Filippov

Mityukha - Nikolai Nizinenkov

Lavitsky - Yuri Elnikov

Chernikovsky - Vladimir Silaev

This recording, made over a period of five years immediately has a number of things going for it, viz. it's the more complete, "definitive" 1872 version, omitting only the St Basil scene. Secondly, it presents Mussorgsky's own, unadulterated score in excellent, stereo, analogue sound which slightly too reverberant but atmospheric. Thirdly, it has an entirely Russian cast which lends it the right earthy, slightly rough atmosphere, avoiding any of the "smoothification" which is a potential hazard when non-native artists undertake it, especially if it is also in the Rimsky orchestration. Initial good impressions are confirmed by the splendid Shchelkalov of Alexander Voroshilo attempting to motivate the crowd – and of course we are in completely safe hands with Fedoseyev in charge; he makes the score breathe, surge and roar and whoever they are, that USSR TV and Radio orchestra and chorus are first rate.

There are some famous names among the cast, but it must be admitted that for all their experience, the lead singers are mostly veterans in their mid-fifties, no longer in their prime. Hence Verdernikov seems to have to heave himself up to top notes which are weak and yelled and his essential tone is a bit grey and hollow; the sliding is wearisome, but if his voice sounds weary, the characterisation itself is suitably world-weary, and as such wholly apt. Artur Eisen makes a slightly woolly but suitably rumbustious Varlaam.

A younger Vladimir Matorin deploys his cavernous voice sensitively and, in many ways, supplies the best singing, as singing per se, in the whole recording. Frankly I cannot help wondering whether, had he the experience to bring Boris to life, he might not have made the better Tsar. Vladislav Piavko has the verve and nerve to sing the Pretender convincingly and attacks the role with vigour, but his tenor tends to spread and bleat under pressure and its intonation can become uncertain. The women singers tend to belong generic Russian types, that being fruity, full-voiced mezzos and rather shrill sopranos, the exception being another revered veteran, Irina Arkhipova, who is decidedly mature for the role of Marina but sings with her usual control and understanding – and is free of wobble. Yuri Mazurok, a favourite of mine, sings beautifully as Rangoni, with keen, focused tone and nice line in bullying intensity – the problem is that he sounds younger than the princess he is trying to control.



Ultimately, the weaknesses in the casting here are not compensated for sufficiently by the advantages of this recording. Several of the better singers here take the same roles in the Ermler recording a couple of years later which overall is preferable to this one – except it is in the Rimsky version.

**Mark Ermler – 1985** (stereo; studio) Alto, Regis

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Boris - Evgeny Nesterenko

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vladimir Atlantov

Marina - Elena Obraztsova

Pimen - Anatoli Babikin

Varlaam - Artur Eisen

Shuisky - Konstantin Lisovsky

Missail - Konstantin Baskov

Rangoni - Yuri Mazurok

Fyodor - Olga Teruchnova

Xenia - Elena Shkolnikova

Hostess - Larissa Nikitina

Simpleton - Alexei Maslennikov

Shchelkalov - Alexander Voroshilo

Krushchov - Alexander Arkhipov

Nurse - Nina Grigorieva

Mityukha - I. Nizienko

First Policeman - Stanislav Suleymanev

Second Jesuit - Alexandre Ognivstev

As long as you don't mind the Rimsky-Korsakov/Ippolitov-Ivanov orchestration version of this opera, there is every good reason to buy it. Purists and aficionados will still want to own the 5 CD set conducted by Gergiev, also with an all-Russian cast, as it offers both the original (rejected) 1869 and 1872 revision/expansion in Mussorgsky's own, spare orchestration but this is a bargain issue with a stellar cast steeped in the authentic Russian tradition and idiom. Furthermore, it is hyper-complete, in that it offers ten scenes, incorporating the Prologue, epilogue in the Kromy Forest and even the St Basil scene in which the simpleton confronts "Tsar Herod" Boris with his guilt - a short episode often omitted in performances of the second version.

There are no weaknesses in the cast, playing or Ermler's conducting; indeed, the recording faithfully reflects the strength in depth of the Bolshoi of thirty years ago. Apart from established stars such as the mightily impressive Nesterenko as Boris, the stentorian Otello-tenor Atlantov as the Pretender Grigory and the equally stentorian-voiced Obraztsova as the Polish Princess Marina, we have major singers like lyric baritone Mazurok in the comparatively minor role of Rangoni and singers I suspect that not many people have heard of, such as the Pimen and the Varlaam, who prove to have superb voices and highly developed dramatic ability. The inclusion of the Polish scene is especially welcome as it proves to be a real highlight, with Obraztsova and Atlantov belting out their extended duet and rising to great heights in the climax of their passion.

There's no beating native Russians in their own music and it's a pleasure to report that the old bugbear of scrappy sound does not apply to this analogue recording, which is full, pleasing and well-balanced.

Those on a budget wanting a traditional performance or just tempted by a supplementary version need not hesitate. As much as I admire Nesterenko's big, smooth voice and convincing vocal acting, I still also want to hear other equally and even more histrionic singer-actors such as Christoff in his 1952 tour de force under Dobrowen, the great and incomparable Mark Reizen in 1948 under Golovanov and

George London's excerpts under Thomas Schippers made in 1961 or his full recording two years later. *Boris Godunov* seems more and more of a masterpiece as the years go by and owning several versions now seems less of a luxury, especially as they can encompass and reflect the range of performance choices in edition and orchestration which have to be made.

PS: Regis provides the wrong recording date of 1982 - it is in fact 1985 - and the wrong accreditation of the role of Pimen to Alexander Ognitsev (who died in September 1981) rather than Anatoli Babikin. That sloppiness doesn't alter the fact that this is a very good version.

**Emil Tchakarov – 1986** (studio; digital) Sony  
Orchestra - Sofia Festival Orchestra  
Chorus - Sofia National Opera

Boris - Nicolai Ghiaurov  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Michail Svetlev  
Marina - Stefka Mineva  
Pimen - Nicola Ghiuselev  
Varlaam - Dimiter Petkov  
Shuisky - Josef Frank  
Missail – Angel Petkov  
Rangoni - Boris Martinovich  
Fyodor - Rossitsa Troeva-Mircheva  
Xenia - Liudmila Hadjieva  
Nurse – Stefka Popangelova  
Hostess - Penka Dilova  
Simpleton - Mincho Popov  
Shchelkalov - Lyubomir Videnov/Kaludi Kaludov

This is the 1872 edition, mainly in Mussorgsky's original scoring, recorded over eight days. Tchakarov does the same as Rostropovich and includes both the St. Basil and the Kromy Forest scenes complete, so the Simpleton has his kopeck stolen twice; whereas Abbado makes a small edit to prevent that duplication, but skipping track 20 on CD3 solves that problem.

I warm to the sense of unity and purpose to this recording; the right atmosphere of dark, brooding menace is established from the first notes. A sharp eye will notice that the recording engineer was none other than Karajan's Michael Glotz, who presides over clearly defined, beautifully balanced sound.

The cast is nearly all Slavic and all three principal basses are Bulgarian – as was the conductor. Ghiaurov is the only bass to have recorded Boris in both this and the Rimsky versions. He is in fact one of three very experienced basses here and celebrated Croatian bass-baritone Boris Martinovich sings Rangoni, so the cast looks very promising. As in his 1970 recording for Karajan, Ghiaurov is emphatically a "singing Boris", but he was fifty-seven when he recorded this one, so I suppose, after his three decades of professional singing, he must be counted as a veteran; there is certainly more of a gritty or rusty quality in his tone than of yore and his top notes lack resonance. but the sparer original scoring helps takes the edge off any excessive lushness. He is older and wiser here but still a mighty presence and delivers a deeply thoughtful, melancholy account of Boris' torment, even if some might him too restrained. He sings tenderly in Boris' exchanges with his children; Rossitsa Troeva-Mircheva makes an attractively-voiced Fyodor and Xenia is pleasant, too.

His death scene is subtly, even cunningly, acted, with suppressed tears occasionally breaking his vocal line and a convincing representation of physical, but not vocal, weakness. In his final cry of "I am still Tsar!" the old Ghiaurov power emerges only for him to sink bank, whispering "Forgive me" – magic.

This make a change from carpet-chewing and really works. The chorus is wonderful here, too, then evidently enjoy their part in the final Kromy Forest scene.

Nicola Ghiuselev has just the right voice for Pimen: grave, wise, paternal with a hint of steel, while Dimiter Petkov has a gravelly, characterful bass well-suited to portraying the reprobate Varlaam. It seems almost to be de rigueur that any Slavic tenor cast as Grigory has to be one of the strenuous, piercing variety which works well enough in depicting the fanatical Pretender but is less apt for Marina's love interest, as that whopping duet can become wearing on the ear if the tenor's tone is all needle and no thread. Michail Svetlev seems to be in the former category but actually keeps the edge in his tone under control for his encounter with Marina and Rangoni and emerges as an impassioned lover; despite the generally dark, subdued nature of Tchakarov's direction, in their meeting, sparks fly.

Also too often compulsory are wobbly mezzos when casting the Hostess and anyone looking forward to re-encountering that custom will not be disappointed here by Penka Dilova; she is also a blot on Tchakarov's *Pique Dame*. At least the Hostess is a comic role and a bit of wobbling is less damaging. Stefka Mineva also has a big, fruity mezzo reminiscent of the typically Slavic sound of better-known singers such as Borodina and Obratsova, but her vibrato is faster and less obtrusive than Dilova's. She is not especially adept with the text but her voice per se is imposing and Marina emerges correctly as strong and spoiled. Martinovich makes a smooth, oily Rangoni, up with the best; the sole American, tenor Josef Frank is a similarly fluent, plausibly manipulative Shuisky. An oddity is that Shchelkalov's Prologue aria is sung – beautifully – by baritone Lyubomir Videnov, but in Act 4 tenor Kaludi Kaludov sings that role; I have no idea why, but both are excellent. It's a pity Mincho Popov sings such a bold, full-voiced Simpleton; he appears to think this is his moment to make a bid for a role in an upcoming verismo production and I don't understand why Tchakarov didn't insist he show some sensitivity, as little of The Holy Fool's pathos and vulnerability comes through.

Tchakarov died from an HIV-related illness aged only 43, five years after making this recording but left behind several estimable recordings of Russian opera; this is undoubtedly one of them. As a whole, it is more thoughtful and even more under-stated than glitzier recordings but it is intense, reflective and deeply felt by all the participants; as such it is rather different, and I find Tchakarov more involving than Abbado and his singers are superior to those on Rostropovich's comparable recording.

A full, quadrilingual libretto with translations is provided, in a thick booklet with photos, biographies and notes, each CD housed in its own case inside an fat cardboard box; no skimping there.

**Mstislav Rostropovich – 1987** (studio; digital) Erato

Orchestra - National Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Choral Arts Society of Washington - Oratorio Society of Washington - Chevy Chase Elementary School Chorus

Boris - Ruggero Raimondi

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vyscheslav Polozov

Marina - Galina Vishnevskaya

Pimen - Paul Plishka

Varlaam - Romauld Tesarowicz

Shuisky - Kenneth Riegel

Missail - Misha Raitzin

Rangoni - Nikita Storozhev

Fyodor - Matthew Adam Fish

Xenia - Catherine Dubosc

Nurse: Mira Zakai

Hostess - Galina Vishnevskaya

Simpleton - Nicolai Gedda

Shchelkalov - Lajos Miller

This very complete recording using Mussorgsky's own scoring, and including the St Basil scene and Kromy Forest, so the Simpleton loses his kopeck twice, was also the soundtrack of a Polish film of the opera; Ruggero Raimondo starred in both. His voice is lighter than most Borises in that he is more a bass-baritone but that gives him more ease in the upper regions of the role and he still has great gravitas, plus beauty of tone, especially when singing softly – although at times I do find his manner a little lugubrious, especially when he slides. His famed linguistic prowess serves him well in delivering the Russian, insofar as I can tell and his vocal acting is vivid, even if he still sounds more Italianate than Russian.

Rostropovich's direction is detailed, transparent and measured; the digital sound, too is clean, clear and finely balanced so that chorus and orchestra remain properly audible and proportionate, with a sense of air and space around the sound. That is, however, another way of saying that it is not especially wild or gripping; the choir could do with more abandon and sing as if they have been well rehearsed rather than throwing themselves into the drama like Dobrowen's White Russians. I miss that sense of unease and menace that pervades more released accounts, which is something Soviet conductors like Golovanov and Melik-Pashayev seem to do better; their recordings grab the listener by the throat with their emotional intensity, whereas Rostropovich has the same problem as Abbado and, some would say, Karajan, in sounding too smooth and controlled.

Yet there are many lovely things here, including an array of fine voices headed by Raimondi. Lajos Miller is a strong Shchelkalov; the hardness in Kenneth Riegel's tenor is no barrier to his impersonating successfully the shifty, oleaginous Shuisky; Paul Plishka is very good as a sonorous, resonant Pimen with fine legato and splendid top notes. Vyscheslav Polozov has one of those very Russian, rather strenuous tenors whose piercing tonal emission is punctuated by glottal plosives; such a sound is not unsuited to portraying the volatile Grigory but he's not exactly easy on the ear. Catherine Dubosc's Xenia is a little shrill but touching and it's a cute idea to have a boy treble sing Fyodor rather than the usual inappropriately bosomy mezzo. The children's choir is also a nice touch, adding an incongruous, even eerie, element of naivety in this predominantly dark opera; presumably the use of a boy and a children's choir was prompted by the exigencies of this being filmed, thus requiring verisimilitude. The renegade monks are a jolly pair, too; Varlaam's song about Ivan the Terrible capturing Kazan goes well and he's amusing as well as vocally capable.

Doubts must creep in, however, about the wisdom of casting a 61-year-old Galina Vishnevskaya in the dual roles of Hostess and Marina. She was of course a great singer and her mature sound is just about acceptable for the former as that is a comic role and banging on about your little duck doesn't require the voice of Aida, but frankly to my ears her Marina is embarrassing. Casting her as the spoiled young princess was surely an act of folly: her tone is squawky and the vibrato too loose; she simply sounds elderly. Similarly, casting a 57-year-old Nicolai Gedda – a former Grigory – as the Simpleton might also look like a risk and indeed his singing in the St Basil scene is very squeezed and nasal but he all but croons his final lament; a more lyrical Holy Fool such as Kozlovsky sings is a rare but welcome thing. Nikita Storoyev contributes a rather throaty Rangoni which is dramatically effective but I prefer a lighter, smoother baritone of the Leonard Warren, Yuri Mazurok cast.

In the end, the low-voltage delivery and central flaw in the casting disqualifies this from inclusion on my recommended list.

**Robert Satanowski – 1985(?)** (live; digital) Capriccio; Koch – 2 CD

Orchestra - Warsaw National Opera

Chorus - Warsaw National Opera

Boris - Anatoly Kotcherga

Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vitaly Tarastchenko

Marina - Ryszarda Racewicz  
Pimen - Jerzy Ostapiuk  
Varlaam - Marek Wojciechowski  
Shuisky - Kazimierz Pustelak  
Missail - Piotr Czajkowski  
Rangoni - Ryszard Ciesia  
Fyodor - Elizbieta Panko  
Xenia - Izabella Klosinska  
Hostess - Jadwiga Teresa Stephen  
Simpleton - Krzysztof Szmyt  
Shchelkalov - Jan Dobosz  
Nurse - Krystyna Dobosz

This is the Rimsky orchestration and appears to be based on the 1872 version; it claims to be the complete work but is cut by thirty minutes or so compared with the full score as recorded by, for example, Gergiev, fitting on to two discs totalling only 156 minutes. It is a very lively affair recorded in excellent digital sound from what was presumably a stage performance, with a cast of names unknown to me, apart Anatoly Kotcherga, who went on to recorded the entire opera under Abbado in a new performing edition. The comments I make next below about his Boris apply equally here; he is a compelling actor but occasionally coarse; there is some unsteadiness and a hint of tremolo in his sustained notes and I do not like his basic tone, which blares. The Varlaam is good but the Shuisky is a dreadful wobbler/bleater and the Marina is a screamer; she sounds like an elderly woman. The Dmitri at first seems passable but sings off-pitch. Moving on...

(The CLOR catalogue tentatively dates the recording date as a questionable 1985; the Koch CD issue date is 1993. A single highlights disc is also available on Laserlight, but as this recording is not in the running, I wouldn't in any case bother.)

**Claudio Abbado – 1993** (studio; digital) Sony

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Slovak Philharmonic - Berlin Radio - Tölzer Sängerknaben

Boris - Anatoly Kotcherga  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Sergei Larin  
Marina - Marjana Lipovsek  
Pimen - Samuel Ramey  
Varlaam - Gleb Nikolsky  
Shuisky - Philip Langridge  
Missail - Helmut Wildhaber  
Rangoni - Sergei Leiferkus  
Fyodor - Liliana Nichiteanu  
Xenia - Valentina Valente  
Hostess - Elena Zarembo  
Simpleton - Alexander Fedin  
Shchelkalov - Albert Shagidullin

This is a highly "professional" recording of an extraordinary masterpiece and comes in a sensible performing edition, using Mussorgsky's own orchestration and consisting mainly of the 1874 performance version, but with judicious inclusion of key passages and one scene from 1869; thus Abbado sanctions the inclusion of the longer of Pimen's accounts of the murder of the Tsarevich and the short scene in which the Simpleton tells Boris that he cannot pray for "a tsar Herod" and of course the opera concludes with the Kromy Forest scene but finally the simpleton's lament for Russia, transposed from that "Herod" scene. Thus the listener misses nothing that Mussorgsky wrote and the

conflation forms a coherent and satisfying unity; Abbado also edits the Kromy scene to ensure that the Simpleton does not for the second time lose the kopek taken from him in the St Basil scene.

However, there are three issues with this recording which somewhat compromise its desirability: first there is the question of whether it sounds authentically Russian and to my ears, at least to begin with, it does not but more like a good, international performance, lacking the gritty, elemental passion which distinguishes truly Russian versions. This has a lot to do with the polish of the Berlin Philharmonic, who are of course masterly but almost too refined; the same might be said of Abbado's conducting, which is highly skilled but typically somehow too bland and polite - at least in the opening scenes, which is why I say above "to begin with", as I find that as the recording progresses I hear more release and gusto in the performance. Certainly the combined chorus sings on a grand scale with real abandon and injects some of the earthiness previously missing. By the time we arrive at the Clock Scene, the joint is humming and that momentum is sustained through the Polish Act. The third reservation centres upon the eponymous lead singer. The challenge of recording Boris is daunting when one recognises that the very greatest Russian and Russian-singing basses have given us their haunted Tsar. Anatoly Kotcherga must compete with legendary interpreters such as, in reverse chronology, Nesterenko, Ghiaurov, Talvela, Christoff, London, Petrov, Pirogov, Reizen and of course Chaliapin - and who would want to be compared with that roster of artists? Kotcherga is a fine singer but does not have an especially imposing vocal presence and his characterisation lacks charisma. His tone can turn nasal and a little hoarse, especially when he pushes for volume, and at key points the middle of the voice lacks heft and resonance; some high notes are almost bawled. Having said that, he is intense and moving in his agony in the early aria "I have achieved supreme power". His soft singing is touching but his death scene fails to terrify in the way it can when Christoff sings it.

The supporting cast is strong; the young baritone Albert Shagidullin makes a firm, if slightly constricted Shchelkalov. Sam Ramey makes a grave, dignified, beautifully intoned Pimen but is rather too smooth and elegant for the old priest. Sergei Larin is excellent: bright-toned, passionate and a credible vocal actor. Elena Zarembo is a pleasing Hostess, as are the Xenia and Nurse; the Fyodor is a good singer but as so often the case, too fruity to sound like a boy. One Gleb Nikolsky is a big, blowsy Varlaam but I have heard richer basses make more of the part. Philip Langridge sounds remarkably idiomatic as the oily Shuisky. Marjana Lipovsek is a bold, somewhat gusty Marina who occasionally does strange things in bleaching out the tone and vibrato in her middle voice to sound hooty.

The sound is first class, both in terms of depth and balance. The booklet is very full but as someone unfamiliar with the Cyrillic alphabet I would have found it much easier to follow the libretto if it offered a transliteration into the Western alphabet - however, a thoughtful guide to Cyrillic letters is also helpfully provided. I take issue with the tone of some of Pamela Davidson's English translation; surely "Phew! I feel terrible" strikes too colloquial a wrong note and to translate the Boyars' collective utterance as "He has died" is simply unidiomatic; nobody says anything other than "He is dead", which is why the French says "Il est mort!" and the German "Er ist tot!"

Abbado's edition represents in many ways the ideal compromise to ensure that we come closest to appreciating Mussorgsky's work at its best and fullest; I only wish that it were a little less worthy and a bit more exciting.

**Valery Gergiev – 1997** (studio; digital) 1869  
version; Philips  
Orchestra - Kirov Theatre (St. Petersburg)  
Chorus - Kirov Theatre (St. Petersburg)

Boris - Nikolai Putilin  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Viktor Lutsiuk  
Pimen - Nikolai Ohotnikov

**Valery Gergiev – 1997** (studio; digital) 1872  
version; Philips  
Orchestra - Kirov Theatre (St. Petersburg)  
Chorus - Kirov Theatre (St. Petersburg)

Boris - Vladimir Vaneev  
Grigory (False Dmitry) - Vladimir Galusin  
Marina - Olga Borodina

Varlaam - Fyodor Kuznetsov  
 Shuisky - Konstantin Pluzhnikov  
 Missail - Nikolai Gassiev  
 Fyodor - Zlata Bulycheva  
 Xenia - Olga Trifonova  
 Hostess - Liubov Sokolova  
 Simpleton - Evgeny Akimov  
 Shchelkalov - Vassily Gerello  
 Nurse - Evgenia Gorokhovskaya  
 Nikitich - Grigory Karassev  
 Mityukha - Evgeny Nikitin

Pimen - Nikolai Ohotnikov  
 Varlaam - Fyodor Kuznetsov  
 Shuisky - Konstantin Pluzhnikov  
 Missail - Nikolai Gassiev  
 Rangoni - Evgeny Nikitin  
 Fyodor - Zlata Bulycheva  
 Xenia - Olga Trifonova  
 Hostess - Liubov Sokolova  
 Simpleton - Evgeny Akimov  
 Shchelkalov - Vassily Gerello  
 Krushchov - Yuri Schikalov  
 Nurse - Evgenia Gorochovskaya  
 Mityukha - Evgeny Nikitin  
 Lavitsky - Andrei Karabanov  
 Chernikovskiy - Yuri Laptev

I have always thought this project to be a model of its kind ever since it appeared twenty years ago, giving the listener the option of the shorter, starker, simple four-part 1869 version or the expanded 1872 version of a Prologue and four Acts, both in one box set. Both are very well cast and in superlative digital sound, vividly and idiomatically conducted by Gergiev – and of course we do not have to worry whether these recordings will have that authentic atmosphere when everyone involved is a native. The chorus is superb and the soloists include some famous names: Olga Borodina as a sultry, sexy Marina with her calculating, hard-as-nails ambition just apparent beneath that alluring exterior; Vassily Gerello is an elegant, smooth-voiced Shchelkalov and Vladimir Galusin as a powerful, febrile Pretender – although the lesser-known Viktor Lutsiuk who sings his counterpart in the earlier version is just as good. Bolshoi stalwart Nikolai Okhotnikov makes a grave, resonant Pimen; Varlaam is sung in rollicking style by Fyodor Kuznetsov; Pluzhnikov is an oily Shuisky; Evgeny Akimov is a plaintive, clean-voiced Holy Fool; all the female voices are firm and free of shriek or wobble. The trio concluding Act 3 is a highlight, when the virile baritone of Evgeny Nikitin joins Borodina and Galusin in one Mussorgsky's most seductive melodies.

Perhaps the only drawback here is that the two fine basses who sing Boris do not have quite the charisma or the vocal heft of the greatest exponents of that role, good as they are. Putilin has a rich, unusually youthful-sounding bass for Boris and his clean sound falls gratefully on the ear. His vocal acting is powerful without exaggeration; he is not afraid to growl and shout but does so musically – insofar as that is possible. Vaneev has a very similar voice and is also an accomplished vocal actor, but is not quite so rich of timbre, being a little nasal, but he, too, is a fine vocal actor and portrays Boris' breakdown movingly.

The booklet provides a full, quadrilingual libretto with a good English translation – except the final words “He is dead!” are once again poorly translated, this time prissily as “He has passed away!”.

(It is possible to buy the two versions separately but I see no point in doing so when you can acquire both economically and derive so much pleasure from having them in one box to compare.)

### **Recommendations**

A first choice must surely be a complete, stereo recording of the original version(s) in Russian, either in one or both (as per Gergiev's recording) of the 1869 and 1872 versions, or in a judiciously assembled composite edition, so that as much as possible of Mussorgsky's intent and music may be heard.

Those criteria necessarily exclude many wonderful performances – excerpts; versions in Italian; live, mono or cut recordings starring superlative basses - that the Boris devotee will want to have to supplement the primary recommendation(s).

Studio mono, Rimsky version: Golovanov 1948-49 (Reizen)

Studio stereo/digital, Rimsky version: Alexander Melik-Pasheyev 1962-63; Ermler 1985

Studio digital, original version(s): Gergiev 1997 (5 CDs)\*; Tchakarov 1986

\*First choice overall for reasons of sound, edition, orchestration and interest – but for more vocal charisma, individuality and dramatic impact, I urge you to sample and choose from among individual performances by Chaliapin, Reizen, Kipnis, Pinza, London, Christoff and Nesterenko, all of which use the Rimsky version.

**Ralph Moore**