

For RCA/BMG

Boris CD

(not used)

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## ALEXANDER KIPNIS - BORIS GODUNOV, RUSSIAN OPERATIC ARIAS, AND SONGS

Russian arias, art songs, or folk songs invariably were included in my father's recital programs no matter the country in which he performed, for that was to be expected of any Russian-born singer (Feb. 1, 1891, Zhitomir, Ukraine - May 14, 1978, Westport, Connecticut.) Bold drama and vivid characterization, in addition to his remarkably bel canto qualities, were distinguishing hallmarks of his style on the operatic stage as well as on the concert platform. I can well recall what a frightening figure he made of the evil Hagen in Wagner's Götterdämmerung, no less so when one saw him in his Metropolitan Opera dressing room still in costume after the performance. Equally memorable are two Boris Godunov vignettes: the sheer, demented terror of his clock scene, as he threw any available stage furniture at the apparition of the ghostly child, and the final death agony, when his collapse down several steps of the raised throne caused even seasoned opera goers to gasp. On the recital stage as well, he always succeeded in bringing to life the <sup>mind</sup> ~~character~~ of what <sup>ever</sup> ~~whichever~~ he portrayed, whether the tyrannical, yet panic-stricken Boris, the tripartite personifications of Schubert's Erlkönig, the rhapsodic descriptions of the apocryphal Lieutenant Kije of Prokofiev, whose vocal excerpts he often sang, or the myriad macabrisms of Mussorgsky's Songs and Dances of Death.

The title role of Boris Godunov was one in which he really should have made his Metropolitan Opera debut during the 1939-40 season, but Edward Johnson, then the company's manager, dissuaded my father because of the shabbiness of the Met's old production (this was not a period in the history of the opera house when new mountings were prevalent). So it was as Gournemann in Parsifal that he first appeared on the Met stage on Jan. 6, 1940, a role with which he was much associated, having sung the part in Bayreuth (with conductors Muck and Strauss), the Berlin State Opera, <sup>the Paris Opera,</sup> London's Covent Garden, Buenos Aires's Teatro Colon (with Busch), and the Chicago Civic Opera, among others. In his long operatic career on three continents, incidentally, he amassed a total of nearly eighty different bass or bass-baritone roles.

It was in Chicago during the 1924-25 season, in fact, that he took the role of Varlaam (in Italian, the language of the rest of the cast) to Feodor Chaliapin's Boris who sang his part in Russian. My father's first title-role Boris, other than the usual excerpts in recital, was a concert performance in German in The Hague. In a stage production in Vichy, France, the local chorus sang in French, while he and the other principals sang in Russian but in evening dress, the train carrying the costumes not having arrived in time. His firm, stated belief, however, was that the opera sounded entirely different as well as far superior in the original language with its sharp consonants and sustained, open tones. Likewise, for reasons of vocal writing and modulations more natural and dramatic, he felt, to the voice, he very much preferred the Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration, which after all was the standard version of his day. His opinion, incidentally, did not change when in 1944 he gave the world premiere performance with Fritz Reiner and the New York Philharmonic of three scenes from Boris in the Shostakovich orchestration. In general, it was Boris that he felt to be his best part, both vocally and dramatically.

His highly praised Metropolitan Boris, with George Szell conducting, first took place on February 13, 1943. He sang in Russian, the rest of the cast, including the Russian-born Irra Pettina as Feodor, Boris's son, in Italian (from 1912 and the time of Toscanini on until the English language version of 1953, Italian had always been used by the entire cast, the sole exceptions being my father and Chaliapin, the original orchestration production all in Russian not taking place until 1974.) A recording of excerpts was planned. However, the so-called Petrillo ban of 1942, which had been instigated by the powerful, Chicago-based head of the musician's union, caused a halt to all United States recording activity until the beginning of 1945. On tour, my father received a hasty message from RCA Victor to cancel all his other immediate engagements so that the long-postponed recording session of Boris highlights, all in Russian, could finally take place. There was also some personal and corporate rivalry involved, for once the ban was lifted, Columbia Records began to work just as diligently to record a similar set, in Italian, with Ezio Pinza, who had split the title role in 1943 with my father.

Robert Shaw, who conducted the Victor Chorale (later to become

the Robert Shaw Chorale) recounted to me only a few years ago his impressions of this, his very first session for RCA Victor, which was held on the top floor of New York's Lotus Club on 57th Street. He remembered in particular how very dramatic in the death scene were my father's final utterances. Victor DM-1000 appeared about a month before the competition, and its success occasioned a followup recording of Russian operatic arias a year later, these being the last of his discs among a total of 139 78 rpm sides recorded between 1916 and 1946.

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Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881): Scenes from Boris Godunov  
(1868/69 & 1871/72; 2nd revision by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, 1908):

Prologue, sc. ii: Coronation Scene

Act I, sc. ii: Varlaam's Song and Come now, comrades, fill up  
your glass

Act II: (Monologue) I have attained the highest power;

(Boris-Shouisky Duet) Most noble lord and czar, thy  
servant and

(Clock Scene) Ouf! I need air

Act IV, sc. ii: Farewell, Prayer and Death of Boris

In Pushkin's tragedy, the Russian regent, Boris has had the child Dmitri, the last heir to the throne, murdered. Proclaimed Czar in 1598, Boris appears before a waiting populace in front of the Cathedral of the Assumption; expressing fears both for himself and for Russia ("My soul is rent! Against my will, ill omened dark forebodings oppress my heart"), he accepts the acclaim of his people ("Glory! Long life and good health.")

A young monk, Gregory, resolves to plot against the Czar by pretending to be the still-living royal heir, Dmitri. He is accompanied to an inn near the Lithuanian border by two other monks, including Varlaam who boisterously sings, bottle in hand, about Ivan the Terrible driving the rebellious Tatars out of Russia ("Once upon a time in the city of Kazan"). As Varlaam continues his imbibing ("Come now, comrades, fill up your glass"), the Pretender asks directions of the hostess for crossing into Lithuania just moments before the arrival of the border guards.



Boris in his apartments in the Kremlin meditates on his six-year reign and his troubled conscience ("I have attained the highest power"). His councillor, Prince Shouisky, arrives to inform him of uprisings in Lithuania by the Pretender ("Most gracious sovereign") and assures him with graphic descriptions of the corpse that the false Dmitri cannot be the murdered child; ordering the Boyar Shouisky out of the room, the impressionable, superstitious Czar suffers terribly from his guilt ("Ouf!, I need air") and commences to hallucinate at the sight and sounds of the chiming clock in the room.

In the great reception hall of the Kremlin, Boris, in the presence of his Boyars, is told the story of a blind shepherd whose viewing of the grave of the murdered child Dmitri has miraculously restored his eyesight. At this revelation, the tortured Boris collapses and calls for his son to be brought to him ("Farewell, my son, I am dying."); he prays for forgiveness as he topples from the throne.

Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky (1840-1893): Eugen Onegin (1878):

(Act III): Prince Gremin's Aria

At a ball in his palace, the Prince Gremin tells his friend Onegin of the love he has for the wife he married two years earlier, not knowing that she had formerly been infatuated with his guest: "People of every age respond to love; how deeply I adore Tatiana."

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908): Sadko (1896):

[scene 4] Song of the Viking Guest

The minstrel Sadko is regaled by songs of foreign visitors to Novgorod, including the Norseman who sings of his country's craggy coast and Vikings' warlike determination: "We were born of the sea and will die by it; swords of steel and sharp arrows will deliver death to <sup>the</sup> enemy."

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887): Prince Igor (premiere 1890):

(Act I, sc. i) Prince Galitzky's Aria

The debauched brother of Yaroslavna, wife of Igor, expresses his hedonistic philosophies: "I hate a dreary life and couldn't stand a single day of the ~~the~~ <sup>kind</sup> Prince Igor leads; I love to live a gay life."

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Alexander Dargomizhsky (1813-1869): Roussalka (1856):

(Act I) The Miller's Aria

The miller advises his daughter, before she tragically becomes the watersprite of the opera's title, on how to catch a husband: "All you young girls are truly stupid; if you never marry, what will become of you?"

Modest Mussorgsky: Song of the Flea (Song of Mephistopheles)

(Goethe - transl. Strugovshchikov) (1879)

Mephisto sings of king who kept a flea, clothing him in velvet and silk, making him a minister and his relations courtiers. No one at court was permitted to scratch: "But we, when we are bitten, we know how to strike back. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Alexander Gretchaninov (1864-1956):

Cradle Song, Op. 1, No. 5 (1887-92) (Lermontov)

"Sleep, child, my beauty; quietly shines the moon over your cradle"

My Homeland, Op. 1, No. 4 (1887-92) (A. K. Tolstoy)

"Oh, my country, free eagles in the sky, wolf in the shadow! Everything to you, to the steppe, the wind, the clouds"

My father, always intensely self-critical in judging his voice and recordings, initially rejected the 1939 test pressing of the two Gretchaninov songs, ostensibly for the most minor of flaws, just as he did with Rachmaninov's O Cease thy singing (below). In later years he capitulated, often playing the discs for his guests at home in Westport, Connecticut.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943):

O Cease thy singing, Op. 4, No. 4 (1893) (Pushkin)

"Do not, fair maiden, sing the sad songs of Georgia; they remind me of another life and distant shores laden with sorrow."

Harvest of Sorrow, Op. 4, No. 5 (1893) (A. K. Tolstoy)

"O thou billowy harvest field, you cannot be reaped with one stroke of the sickle; O my thoughts, you cannot be expressed with one word."

The composer, I was told, admired my father's performances of his songs

and looked forward to recording for Victor an album in which he would accompany both my father and soprano Maria Kurenko; the project had to remain unconsummated at Rachmaninov's death.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971):

Tilimbom (Trois histoires pour enfants: No. 1, 1917) (Russian trad.)

"The goat shed is on fire; the goat calls for help, the cat rings the alarm, the hen goes for water, the rooster fills the pail; they put out the fire and then all sit around and sing Tilimbom"

IGOR KIPNIS

Redding, Connecticut

1879

NB for Nancy Swift and Jack Pfeiffer:

Spellings, titles, and so forth are according to some of the latest references (but not Grove's English versions of Russian names) and have been checked and double checked. Thus, the titles above should be used for all heading/label/etc. information. Also, I have listed (and written about) the operatic arias (following the Boris excerpts) in the order in which they appear in the original 78 album.