ISSN 1512-2018

UDC 78.01

The Semiotic Exploration of Madness in Modest Mussorgsky's Opera: The Case of *Boris Godunov*

Stacy Olive Jarvis
PhD Student, The University of Birmingham
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, B15 2TS

Abstract

Scenes of operatic madness have long been a focal point in European musicology, engendering extensive academic attention and discussion. The challenge of developing a typology of madness based on musical elements alone has led scholars to focus primarily on textual sources, especially librettos. This paper seeks to thoroughly analyse scenes of madness in Modest Mussorgsky's seminal work, Boris Godunov, examining both musical and textual elements.

A notable and novel aspect of this research is the initial analysis of madness in the male characters of Boris Godunov, particularly in the opera's final act. The methodological approach of this study is specifically designed to support this analysis. Surprisingly, the theme of the protagonist's madness has not previously been the sole focus of European scholarly publications. This research thus aims to establish a comparative framework for understanding 'male' madness in the operatic context of Boris Godunov.

Utilising textual analysis, musical examination, and historical context, this study aims to provide a detailed understanding of the persistent fascination with madness in opera. Furthermore, it seeks to articulate and clarify the broader implications of this thematic exploration for our comprehension of the complex aspects of the human psyche.

Key words*: Mussorgsky, scene of madness, Boris Godunov, monologue, timbre variation.*

Introduction

The theme of madness has long captivated operatic scholars, tracing its lineage from the 17th-century Venetian school to modern productions. Depictions of madness in opera are crucial for character development and serve as dramatic fulcrums, often marking climactic or resolution points in the narrative.

Cultural scholar Courtney Miller identifies four distinct phases in the historical evolution of operatic portrayals of madness: the 'early modern period' of the 18th century, the ‘bel canto’ era from the late 18th to mid-19th century, the 'romanticism' of the late 19th century, and ‘modernity’ in the 20th and 21st centuries. According to Miller, changes in the depiction of madness on stage are driven by advancements in psychology, summarised by the axiom, ‘As the understanding of madness evolved, so did its operatic interpretation’. Each period is characterised by different representations of madness: mania and melancholia in the early modern period, melancholia and hysteria during bel canto, passion and hysteria in the romantic era, and the Oedipus complex and obsessional ideas in modernity [1].

Mary Ann Smart, another prominent scholar in this field, explores how 19th-century operatic madness was intertwined with romanticism's dualism. This dualism juxtaposed the rational world with an individual's vibrant, often misunderstood existence. Madness in opera during this time often involved lone heroes marked by their madness, acting and suffering in a romanticised escape from ordinary life [2]. Romantic music, fantasies, and illusions became hallmarks of these

ISSN 1512-2018
madness scenes, appealing to audiences' desires for emotional intensity and catharsis.

The 19th century saw a notable shift in operatic portrayals of madness, transitioning from Enlightenment clarity to Romantic ambiguity [3]. Female heroines often became the primary victims of madness in these narratives, facilitating audience engagement and empathy. The romanticisation of madness, particularly in women, was a means to evoke powerful emotional responses from the audience.

Despite the extensive focus on 19th-century opera, scholars like Smart and Miller critique the tendency to overlook earlier examples from the 17th and 18th centuries and the long-standing traditions that shaped operatic depictions of madness.

In the latter half of the 19th century, understanding real madness became more sophisticated, complicating composers' efforts to address this theme without criticism. This led to a decline in the use of madness as a dramatic device. Hysteria remained a common diagnosis, often attributed to women, marked by excessive emotionalism and sensitivity. However, Miller notes a shift during this period where composers began to emphasize romantic passion over illness, portraying characters driven to ecstasy and extraordinary acts. Madness thus evolved from being seen as an illness to an extremely agitated state [4].

European opera's engagement with madness is significant for its ability to reveal characters' inner turmoil and explore complex psychological states and emotions. The use of obsession, tragic consequences, intense emotions, and supernatural elements adds psychological depth, captivating audiences and evoking empathy. Ultimately, madness in opera serves as a potent tool for exploring intricate psychological and emotional landscapes, reflecting broader cultural and historical trends.

Classification of mad characters in opera art

The definition of 'mad scene' has become a subject of debate in art history. For instance, the definition of madness given in *Fée New Grove Dictionary of Opera* encompasses only later instances. It does not align well with similar scenes found in 17th century sources. The mad scene is described as 'an operatic scene that serves as a brilliant means of demonstrating the singer's histrionic vocal talent and includes complex coloratura embellishments' [5].

Identifying the role of madness in the plot and the character designated as 'mad' must be considered dramaturgically. In some operas, a character is almost constantly in a state of madness, and it makes sense to refer to them as crazy. In such cases, everything they sing, regardless of its apparent 'reasonless', can generally be seen as potentially mad. In such instances, it is evident that 'mad music' encompasses everything directly accompanying or expressing the actions and emotions of the 'crazy character', even if the surface characteristics of this music do not appear particularly 'mad'.

In this context, the term 'mad' means 'irritated' or 'temporarily distracted' and this poses a confusing issue for this research. Perhaps one way to address this problem could involve studying the mechanisms of 'masking' in music-theatrical situations. This includes the 'mask' imposed on the persona presented by the singer on stage in contrast to their true essence, the 'concealment' of real motives behind the apparent (real dramatic situations behind 'pretended' ones) in the plots and characterisations of operatic works, and the representative-mimetic function of artworks, as discussed by philosopher Theodor Adorno [6].

No matter how illustrative this 'masking theory' may turn out to be, it will still be only a part of a more general semiotics of representation on the stage. This semiotics is performed for us by the mad scenes and characters when we listen to examples from opera traditions and reinterpret them in modern terms. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote: 'The motif of madness is very characteristic of any grotesque because it allows us to look at the world with different eyes, untainted by commonly accepted notions and evaluations. In romantic grotesque, madness takes on a gloomy, tragic shade of individual isolation' [7].

Miller acknowledges the connection between gender and mental illness: mania was considered a male disease, while melancholia was seen as a female one (Miller, 2015, p. 10). The author does not provide explanations regarding male madness specifics and does not offer

ISSN 1512-2018
corresponding examples. Concerning female characters, the researcher uses the medical term ‘hysteria’ and notes the characteristic causes of the illness: nervous system characteristics, and behaviour (fragile physique, excessive sensitivity and melancholic depression), as well as physiological pathologies (lack of sex and pregnancy or, conversely, frequent childbirth, miscarriages) [8].

Barefoot, unkempt, dressed in white garments, the mad opera heroines are incapable of recognizing familiar faces and experience hallucinations. The surrounding chorus observes in horror the incoherent speech of the deranged characters: disjointed recitative with sudden changes in tempo, ‘unforeseen alterations of key and mode; singing unaccompanied and a large number of embellishments, especially rapid runs up and down chromatic scales’ [9].

When the characters descend into madness, they become more agitated, anxious, or despairing. Their emotions are vividly conveyed through music and singing. The characters' inner turmoil and mental anguish come to the forefront, captivating the audience and evoking empathy. Visions, hallucinations, encounters with mythical beings and otherworldly creatures—all of this imparts distorted mental states to operatic characters.

Michel Foucault explains the difference between madness and mental illness because of historical shifts in discursive formations: ‘Mental illness and madness are two different configurations that converged and became entangled in the seventeenth century and are now diverging before our eyes, or rather, in our language’ [10].

In most cases, the characters lose their sanity towards the finale. The question of recognising this state becomes problematic because the means used to depict a character as insane do not necessarily coincide with those used for portraying ‘the insane’. Clues are usually provided within the author’s remarks or in the form of sudden events: the tragic death of a loved one or a forced separation—temporary but intense behavioural symptoms (crying, rage). The problem lies in the fact that the symptoms and events themselves that may trigger extreme musical expression do not guarantee that the character has genuinely gone insane. In critical literature, such extreme moments are often called ‘triadic scenes', because there can be ordinary human grief or justified anger.

Ester Houser, through her analysis, refutes the stereotypical notion of the predominance of scenes depicting female madness. She notes some trends in the interpretation of madness characters: in 17th-century operas, the darkening of reason was often presented in a comedic light, while in 18th-century operas, the emphasis shifted towards the tragic [11].

Yuri Lotman emphasising the unpredictable behaviours of the mad, their greater freedom of action, and the cunning that opponents of the mad do not anticipate. The mad break through the boundaries of what is permissible, surprising those around them [12]. Thus, he explains the reaction of those around him to the actions of the mad and their behaviours. As a result, people fear them, as they don't know what is happening or what the mad are going to say or do. If the mad individual cannot perceive the logical sequence of actions and words and the linear flow of time, predicting these actions is impossible.

In his opera *Boris Godunov*, Modest Mussorgsky portrays an emotionally vulnerable individual who becomes a victim of both his own guilt and the betrayal of those around him. Boris murders the Tsarevitch Dmitry to seize the throne. He is a psychopathic and blood-thirsty tyrant. Boris dreams of his own prosperity and absolute power but descends into madness due to his insatiable thirst for power, ultimately leading to his demise. There cannot be a better psychological portrayal in an opera than Mussorgsky’s Tsar. There is no more vividly painted in a historical backcloth, and no more commanding, terrifying and pitiable figure to bestride the stage [13].

ISSN 1512-2018

Table 1: Male madness in operas of the nineteenth century. Compiled by the author.

Composer	**Opera**	**The year of creation**	**Character**	**Voice**	**Reason madness**
Pyotr Tchaikovsky	*Queen of Spades*	1890	Herman	Tenor	Passion enrichment
Modest Mussorgsky	*Boris Godunov*	1874	Boris[1]	Bass	Thirst for power
Alexander Dargomyzhsky	*Rusalka*	1848–1855	The Miller	Bass	Father's grief
Giuseppe Verdi	*Othello*	1887	Othello[2]	Tenor	Jealousy
	Nabucco	1841	Nabucco[3]	Baritone	Thirst for power

Anatomy of madness of Boris Godunov in Mussorgsky's opera

Mussorgsky's opera unfolds Boris' tragic fate. When characterising Boris in Mussorgsky's palette of colours, dark tones predominate: a low accompanying register, a heavy, measured rhythm of basses, gloomy harmonies, minor tonalities. The foundation of Mussorgsky's orchestra is the string section. Brass instruments are introduced by the composer with great caution. Solo instruments in the opera are limited.

All stages of Boris' character development, condemned to the loneliness of his oppressive guilt - from the coronation scene to the death scene - are marked by monologues that create constant psychological 'impulses' that contribute to a specific turning point in the development of the drama, become the main form of solo singing in the opera, and completely replace the aria. Mussorgsky combines the principle of declamatory recitative with the arioso principle, enhancing the character's integrity and internal unity.

Carl Dahlhaus provides a literal-tactile scheme of the rondo-like form of Boris's monologue (tonality indicated as C♭ major), connecting it in meaning to the context where repetitions in the form are internally motivated by the state of delirium and nightmare periodically overtaking Boris [14]:

a^1	a^2	b^1	a^1	b^2	c	a^1	a^3	d
4	4	7	4	6	11	4	4	10

Alongside the parallel development of plot lines in the opera, which does not require dialogue as a structural principle of drama (self-sufficient, according to Carl Dahlhaus), there is a synchronous development of characters. The characters appear to be linked by invisible threads, which gradually become more noticeable as the musical-dramatic story develops [14]. The initial appearance of Boris in the second scene of the prologue immediately reveals the character's complexity and internal contradictions. Two deaths, the innocent infant and the aging king, signify the temporal

[1] Eshter Huser points to a double insanity: the visions of Tsar Boris fall into the category of real madness, while he classifies the behaviour of the Fool as 'other' cases.

[2] The difference is starkly underlined by the two composers' choice of voice-type. Otello is a dramatic tenor, as befits a hero and a lover; Boris is a bass, as befits a tsar, father and villain. Indeed, Boris's dark and heavy authoritative voice becomes overwhelmed with guilt and melancholy, redeemed only by love for his children.

[3] Neil Brener points out Verdi's 'unsuccessful' attempt to portray madness in the opera *Nabucco*.

ISSN 1512-2018
boundary within the opera. In the opera, Boris is portrayed as a psychologically weak and reclusive figure. Except for two ceremonial appearances, he prefers a confined space. Thus, life and death delineate the boundaries of the hero's suffering, pursuit of happiness, power, and freedom. The stage of embodying Boris's madness and death scenes is pulsating and unpredictable in the narrative.

The first monologue of Boris, ‘Sorrows my soul’ draws its intonations from the composer's orchestral introduction to the opera (fourths with mournful seconds). It is preceded by the principal leitmotif, resonating within the orchestra. It conveys the heavy inner turmoil of the Tsar, who has finally attained full power but is tormented by gloomy forebodings. Violins and violas, in octaves, impart expressiveness to the leitmotif. This is enriched by the sixth chord VI of the ‘Schubertian’ degree (the entrance of clarinets, bassoons, and string basses in a relatively low tessitura). Its sound coincides with the second syllable of the word ‘sorrows’, emotionally emphasising it to convey the hero's immersion into his inner world. The composer meticulously explains the nuances of performing this chord in the lower strings' pianissimo-sforzando with a subsequent wedge symbol, denoting diminuendo. Similarly, the word ‘fear’ is highlighted in the following phrase. Thus, the expressiveness of the sound ensures a harmonious unity of harmony, timbre, tessitura, dynamics, and articulation.

Boris' character is first given an extended characterisation in the second act. The remark ‘in contemplation, he sifts through parchments and scrolls’ contributes to the portrayal of the tsar's changing psychological state: from melancholy to fear, from intense agitation to a psychological breakdown. In the hero’s monologue, the instrumental introduction features an excerpt from Tsar's first D-minor theme heard in A♭ minor.

The monologue begins with Boris's main leitmotif, heard in the first monologue of the opera's prologue. All five parts of the string orchestra are involved, but it sounds like three-part harmony: the composer duplicates the melody an octave lower with the violas, emphasising its expressiveness, even though this results in parallel octaves, which could have been avoided by giving the viola line its own independent voice.

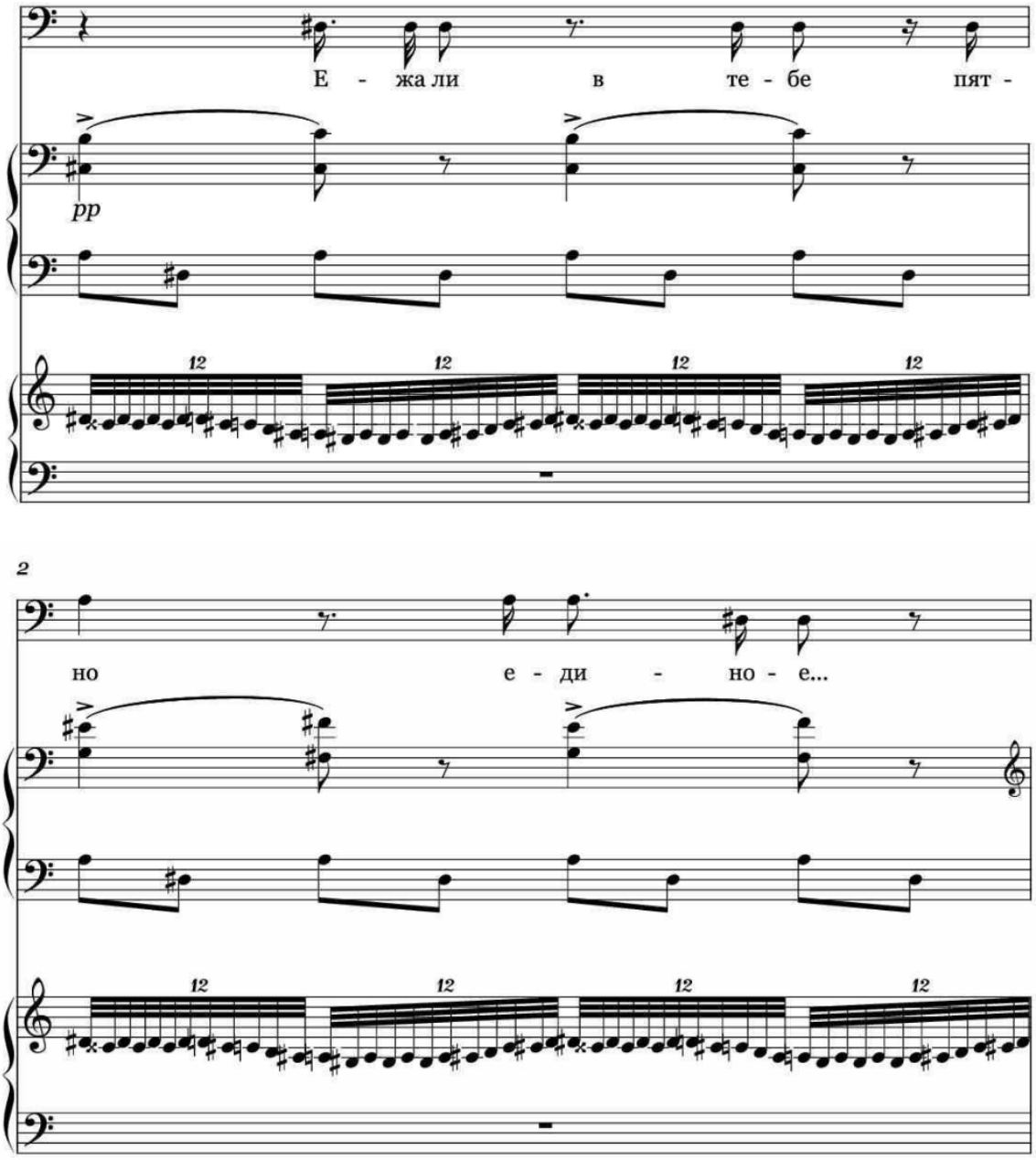
In the second monologue of the character, Boris reflects on his sorrows, on his uncertainty as a ruler. Most importantly, his resentment towards the people who did not accept him. This passage conveys the idea of the hero's illusions being shattered. The use of past tense verbs eloquently suggests that Boris' past actions are not appreciated or understood by common people.

Mussorgsky alternates orchestral groups at short distances, not blending them. The phrase ‘I felt, all the blood rushed to my face’ is accompanied by bassoons and French horns, the following phrase ‘and heavily descended’ is played with the strings, and the key phrase ‘Oh, cruel conscience, how dreadfully you punish!’ is highlighted by the entire group of woodwinds with two French horns. Such timbral fragmentation contributes to creating the impression of Boris's unbalanced state and carries a specific expressive load.

Boris's inner turmoil leads him to hallucinate, the theme of which consists of rapidly accelerating seconds based on complex harmonies with distant functionality, such as being in a tritone interval relationship (Figure 1).

ISSN 1512-2018

Figure 1: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov* (Saint Petersburg: W. Bessel & Co, 1909), end of second act.



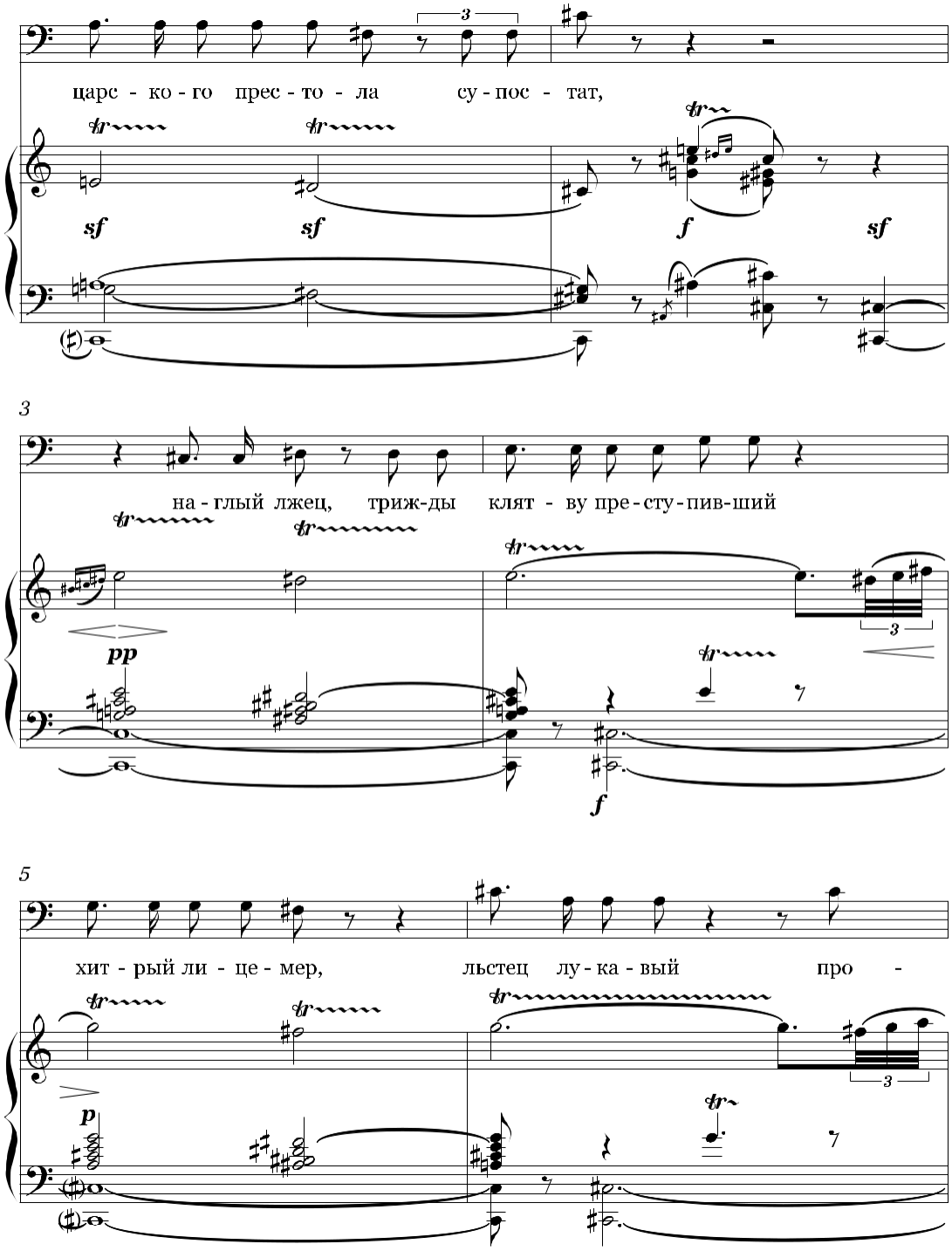
Tsar’s confusion reaches its peak. In the orchestra, a descending chromatic theme emerges (string tremolo at the booming tuba's pedal point), and almost in a whisper, as if in delirium, Godunov utters words about the bloodied spectre of an infant haunting him at night.

The theme of hallucinations gradually grows from quavers to triplets, then to semiquavers, invading both Boris's second monologue and his subsequent dialogue with Shuisky, the scene with the carillon, and the death scene. Here, intonations of screams and wails intertwine with chilling rustles. In its swift descending motion, the theme spans five octaves. Having reached a low register, it freezes in an anxious tremolo. The final monologue concludes with Boris' cry, sounding like a heavy moan.

Mussorgsky conveys Boris's psychological crisis through his speech, which initially sounds authoritative and sharp. After receiving news about the Pretender, it becomes restless, bewildered, and unstable. The soloist's melodic line consists of recitative exclamations, with rhythm taking on a leading role (dotted rhythms and triplets). The phrases are short, spanning seconds and thirds, and in climactic moments, they expand to augmented fifths (Figure 2).

ISSN 1512-2018

Figure 2: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, end of second act.



Also tormented by visions, the Tsar cannot speak coherently. The concluding scene of Boris's hallucinations in the second act is entirely built on recitative. Its distinctive feature is its discontinuity, shouts, and exclamations, all driven by the Tsar's emotional turmoil. For the first time in operatic practice, the composer recreates the sensation of a person deeply tormented by a guilty conscience and pursued by visions. His behaviour becomes increasingly disordered, and everyone believes he has ‘gone mad’ [15].

One of the dramatic threads is the relentless exploitation of Shuisky's thoughts about Dmitry's innocent murder. The Tsar's guilt is exacerbated by Shuisky's account of the innocent murdered infant. Boris' psychological crisis is exacerbated by the presence of the second ‘infant’ – Feodor's son. Subconsciously, the hero's actions are projected onto him as well: he too is a vulnerable potential heir to the throne and a victim of palace intrigue. Tsarevich Dmitry only exists in Godunov's

ISSN 1512-2018
imagination (the theme of nightmare involves chromatic descending gamut-like motions). For Andrew Khan, Tsar's guilt had no significance; what mattered to the dramatist was the 'psychological effect conveyed through rumours that trouble Boris' (Kahn, 1998-1999).

Figure 3: Photograph from *Boris Godunov* directed by Richard Jones at the Royal Opera House, 2016.

Boris is thrilled by Shuisky's words. His excitement reaches its peak when, in the approaching darkness, the overseas clocks with chimes come to life. Mussorgsky recreates the clock chime as it is perceived by the suffering, ailing Tsar. The characteristic tritone intonation of the chime and the clearly exaggerated rumbling of the mechanism. This is simulated by bassoons, French horns, and 32nd-note figurations in the first violin section, and then followed by a tremolo in the timpani. This technique engenders a hyperbolic amplification of the auditory perception of the clock's tolling within the Tsar's consciousness. This is rhythmically synchronised with his own heartbeat acceleration. This results in pulsating sharp pains in his head, reproduced by staccato figures played by oboes and flutes. The composer skilfully intensifies the orchestral sound, gradually complicating the texture by introducing more new instruments, and accurately conveying Boris's extremely nervous and excited state through the trills of violins and the alternation of 'heavily breathing' French horns with their highly expressive changing harmonies and sharp 'stings' of flutes, oboes, trumpets, and pizzicato violas and cellos in the high register.

A formidable, resonant tuba solo in E♭ on the note F, followed by a subsequent crescendo and diminuendo, disrupts the orchestral tutti, heralding the appearance of the phantom in Boris's obscured consciousness. The abrupt transition from the lush orchestral sound to the solitary tuba sound creates a staggering impression no less potent than the initial tutti entry at fortissimo.

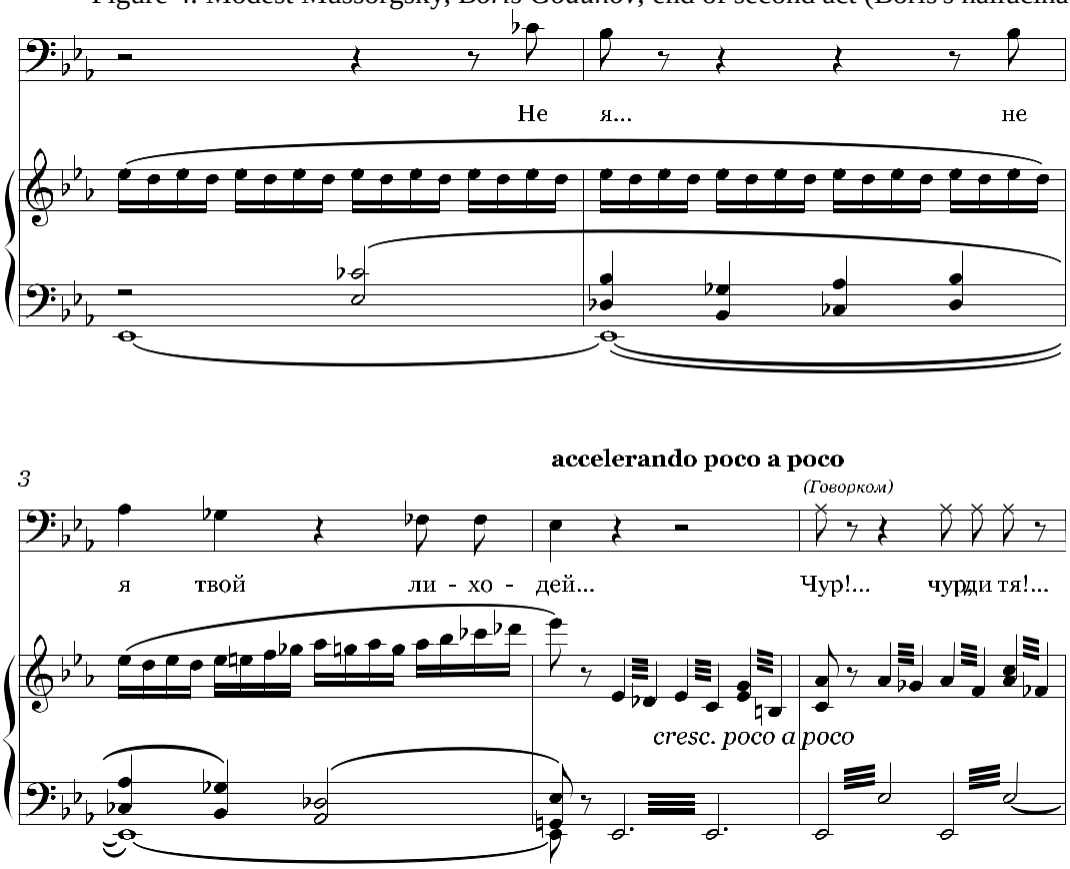
The string section (excluding the double basses) executes tremolo strokes, articulating the leitmotif of Tsarevich Dmitry's spectre. It is joined by the woodwind section, featuring French horns, performing a meandering melodic line in parallel sixths.

Beyond its evocative role, the chimes' music serves a psychological function. Given Boris' agitated state, it instils superstitious fear and triggers hallucinations. The ominous rustling of the violins (chromatic figurations) and the tantalising phrases of the woodwind instruments, accompanying the chimes' theme, pave the way for another iteration of the hallucinatory motif. Echoes of Dmitry's theme is now interwoven. In the moment of hallucinations, Mussorgsky

ISSN 1512-2018

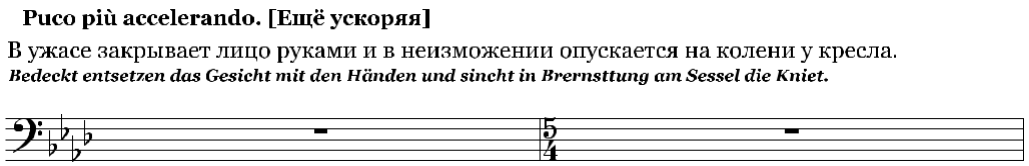
remarks, ‘As if dispelling a phantom', emphasising Boris's hallucinatory experience (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, end of second act (Boris's hallucinatory scene).



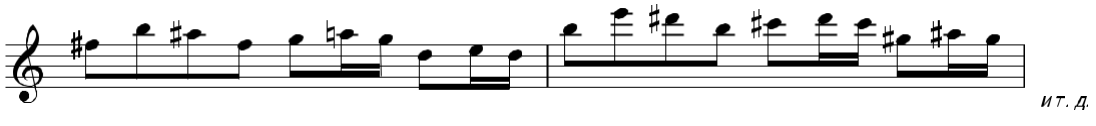
Concluding this scene, there is a stage direction: ‘In horror, he covers his face with his hands and, overcome with exhaustion, sinks to his knees beside the chair— the character refuses to witness the phantasmagoria that torments him’ (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, end of second act (Boris's hallucinatory scene).



The authorial annotations underscore the monarch's profound psychological frailty, as manifested in his deeds. He effects instantaneous shifts in his comportment from placidity to maximal tension, and earnestly attempts to shield himself from his haunting visions. The motif of madness culminates in the fourth act. The monarch's internal conflict reaches its zenith. Boris, tormented by conscience pangs, teeters on the brink of madness. His final monologue is delivered at the scene of his death, serving as the ultimate expression of the evolution of Godunov's character. Pimen's account of Dmitry's innocent murder serves as the immediate catalyst for Boris’s agony when he collapses unconscious. Echoes of the hallucination theme resurface. In his imagination, Dmitry's ghost stands unwaveringly, transforming from a mere apparition into a tangible presence. In the orchestra, against a backdrop of major chords, a modified Dmitry theme unfolds (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, fourth act (Pimen’s story).



ISSN 1512-2018

He feels like the murdered Dmitry is haunting him. This torment, the soul's horror at the committed villainy, persists until the final moments of his life. This is expressed through a surprising dramaturgical revelation by the composer: monks' chanting is incorporated. Their prayer, seemingly inappropriate for the Tsar's funeral, focuses on a murdered infant, the one thing a departing soul cannot overcome. The appearance of this theme is preceded by the strings' tremolo, anticipating the ghost.

Within the orchestral arrangement, one encounters the dolorous and stately motif that encapsulates the outcast Boris. His profound moral torment ultimately propels the monarch towards the precipice of insanity, thereby marking the zenith of his internal conflict. In sum, 'the tragedy of Boris lies in the inexorable moral degradation wrought by his insatiable lust for power, rendering him irredeemable in salvation's eyes' [16].

The monologue at Boris' death scene commences with a rendition of the C minor theme from the second tableau of the prologue, bearing a semblance to a funereal march. The monarch's speech now exhibits increased instability. The recitative has shed its former fluidity and grandeur. The monologue's overall structure appears more fragmented. In the frequent transitions between episodes, themes, and intonations, and in the emergence of fragmented exclamations, one discerns the reflection of the dying monarch's disoriented state.

Boris' prayer in D♭ major is abruptly interrupted by the sharp tolling of a bell (the tritone-swaying theme of G-C♯ in the bass on an ostinato rhythm) and the offstage resonation of a tamtam, both contributing to the simulation of a funereal bell tolling. As the chorus approaches the scene, it becomes louder and louder.

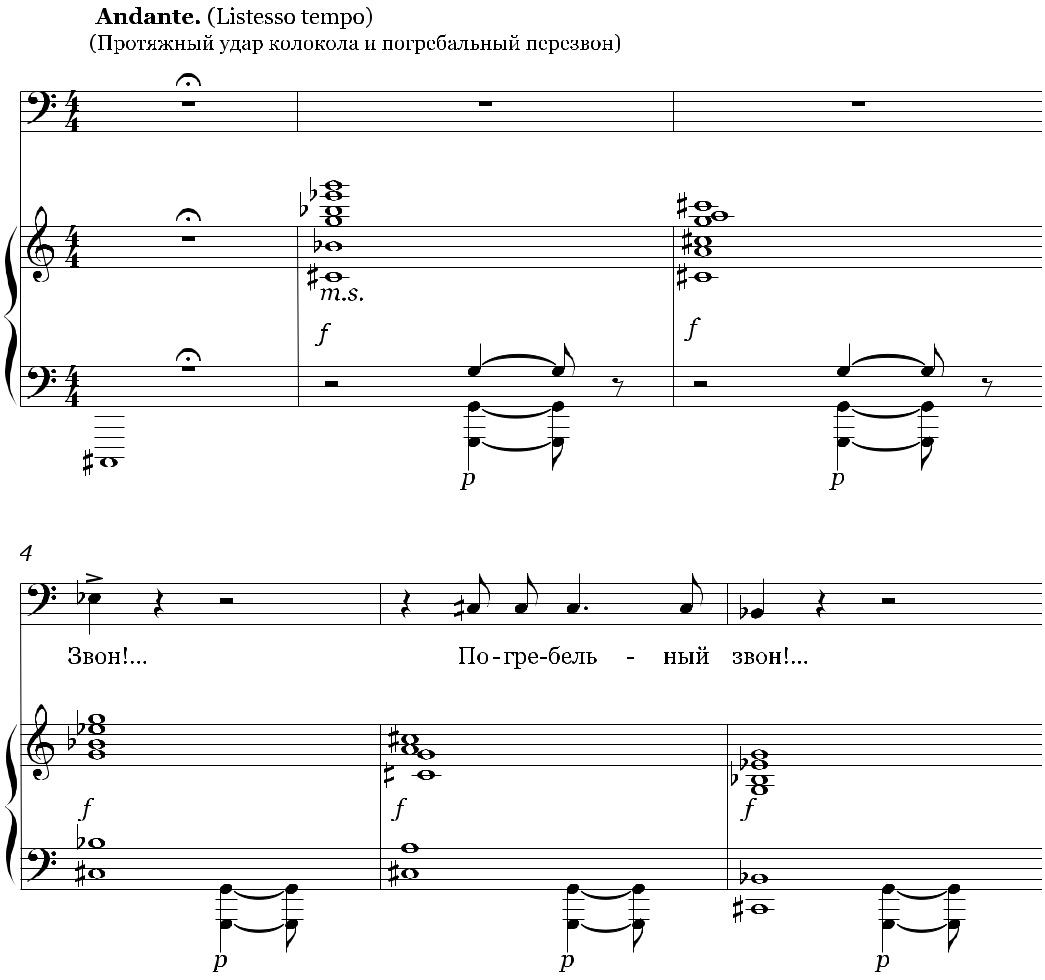
The choral part comprises two sections that share similarities in their choral structure, diatonic harmony, and smooth vocal lines (with virtually no leaps; the parts progress gradually, undulating in seconds and thirds). This is how Mussorgsky enhances the effect of the hero's death. However, in the second section of the choir, text resembling fragments from Boris' monologue and the scene with the clocks from Act 2 ('I see the dying infant...') is used. This technique of combining church choral style with text associated with the hero's inner madness creates the effect of hallucinations again invading Boris's consciousness.

Against this backdrop, the Tsar's recitations appear even more disquieting. Orchestral grand pauses emphasise instrument entry. Suddenly, as they intrude into the musical fabric instead of the expected tonic, the bell tolling theme is perceived as the invasion of a sinister, antagonistic force. It is the same sequence of vivid chords that had such a celebratory character in the coronation scene.[4] The altered sonic character in this passage is a result of the new orchestration (trombone with tamtam and pizzicato double basses), which exposes the unstable tritone interval, conflicting with the lingering sound of G♭ (Figure 7).

[4] The theme of bell-ringing frames the part of Boris, which is present in the main centuries of his life's journey - his accession to the throne and his death. The theme, which appeared to be an expression of festive jubilation, becomes the herald of a tragic denouement.

ISSN 1512-2018

Figure 7: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, fourth act (the funeral bells).

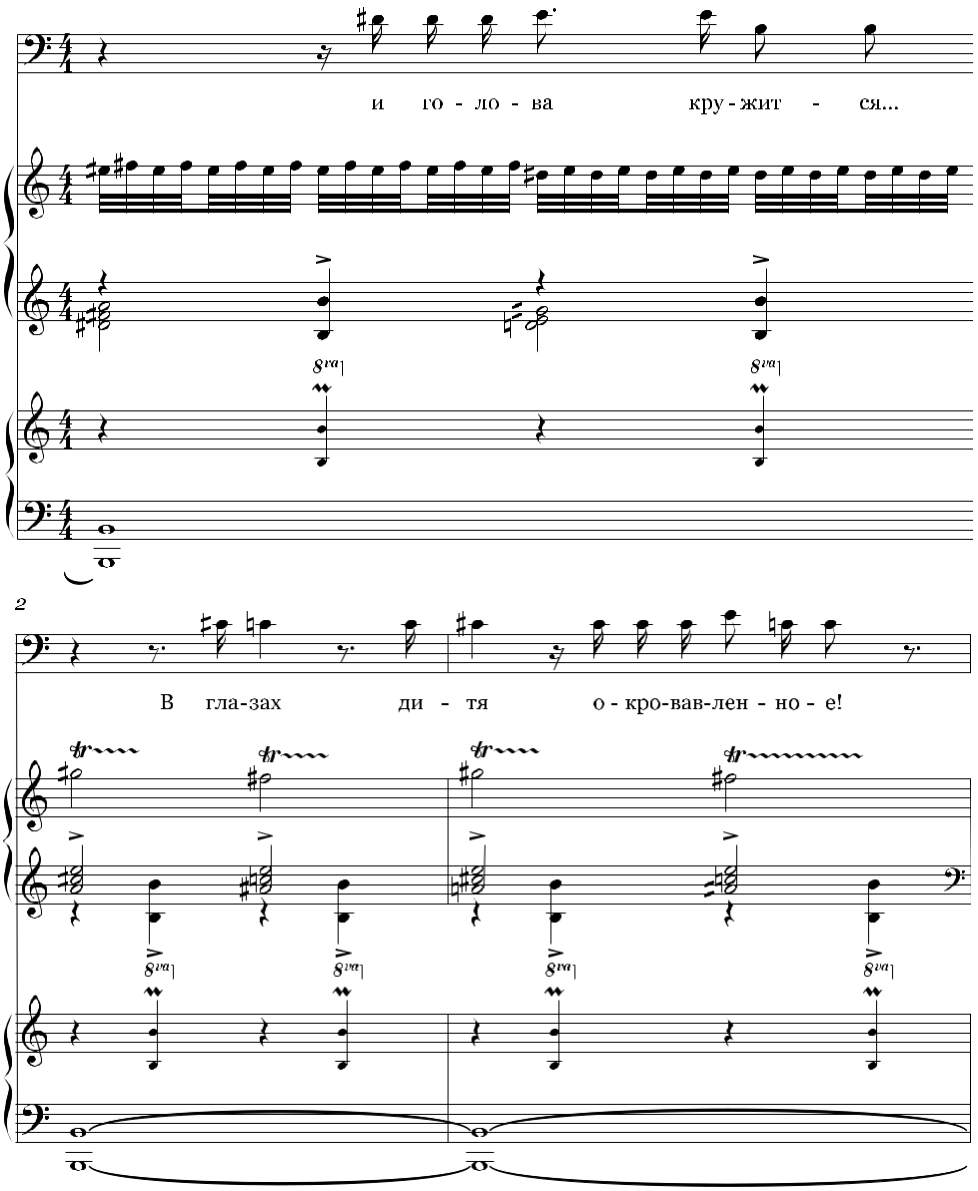


A ghost appears before Boris, as if shaking him to the core, the thought of mortal sin haunts him: ‘I see a dying child, and I weep, I weep, he squirms and trembles, he cries for help, and there is no salvation for him...’. The vocal phrases in this section consist of short recitative structures, the main intonation of which are leaps of fourths. Boris's speech is disjointed, indicating the confusion of his mind, the haste of his deathbed instructions, and the fear that the Tsar was never able to dispel.

Boris' hallucinatory scene consists of 15 bars. Its beginning is marked by the words ‘And my head spins... before my eyes... a child... bloodied!’ The soloist's theme consists of a series of short, jagged motifs, with each word separated by a pause. The composer employs a recitative style in the vocal part, avoiding wide leaps and limiting it to seconds and thirds. Only twice does he introduce a fourth interval (in the word ‘People...’ an ascending perfect fourth A♭ to D♭, and in the final phrase ‘Away, child’, a descending diminished fourth C♭ to G). The use of a staccato rhythm plays a significant role in creating panicked speech and hallucinations. This is done by emphasising the stressed syllables in key words in the text. Thus, the vocal part transitions from declamatory (used in Boris' monologues and dialogues with Shuisky) to recitative (Figure 8).

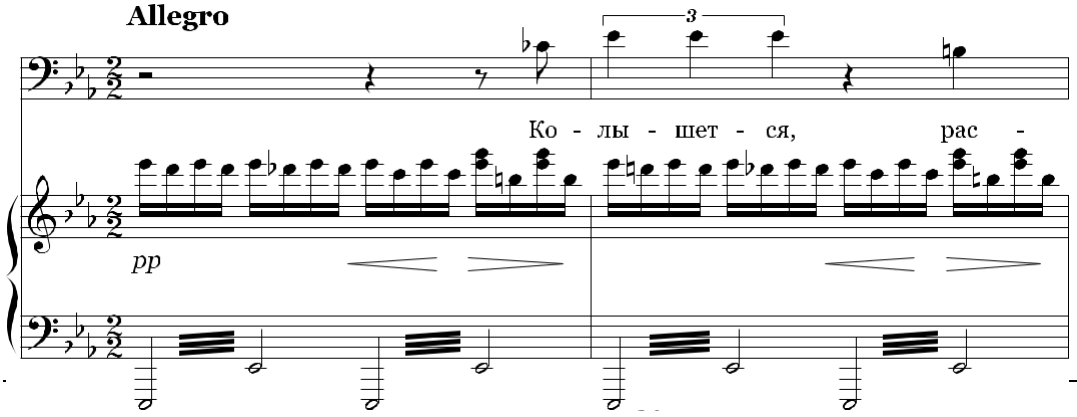
ISSN 1512-2018

Figure 8: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, end of second act (Boris's hallucinatory scene).

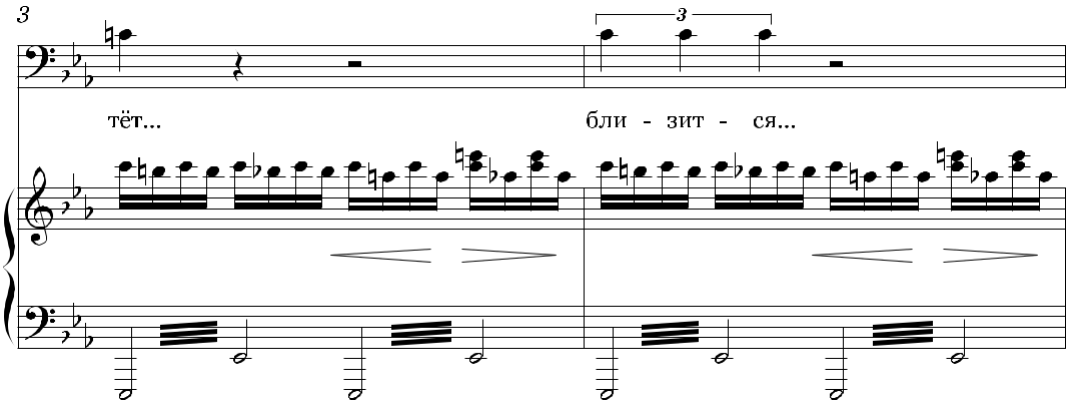


In the first four bars, the orchestral part relies on a sequence of harmonies consisting of major seventh chords (B-D♭ -F♯-A♯, E-G♯-B-D-D♯, A-C♯-E-G♯) concluding with a transition to an B major harmony. Subsequently, the accompaniment texture changes. An organ point on E♭ emerges, against which the theme of Boris's nightmare resonates, intertwined with the theme of Prince Dmitry. In this manner, the composer, through orchestral techniques, complements the portrayal of the hero's hallucinations (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, end of second act (Boris's hallucinatory scene).

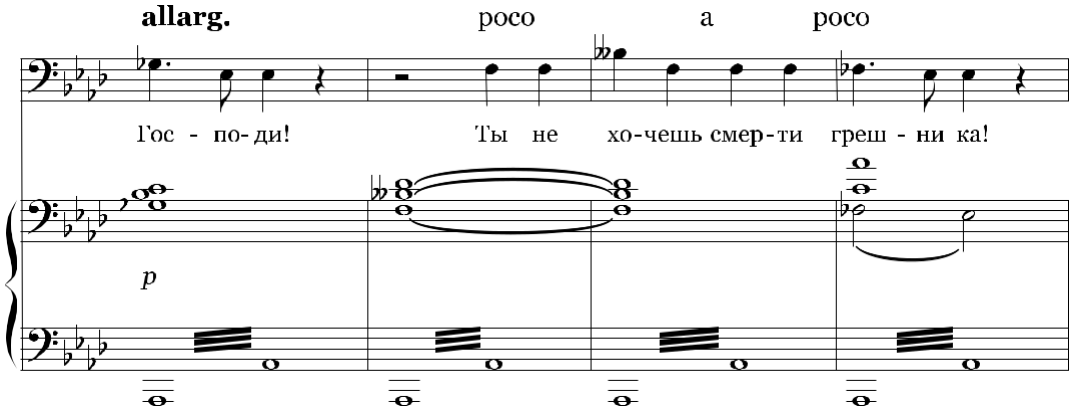


ISSN 1512-2018



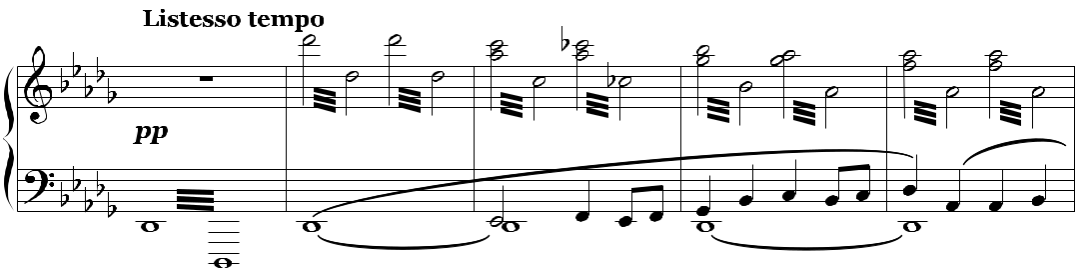
The abrupt shift from dissonant harmonies and chromatic progressions to the stable A♭ major, enriched with lowered degrees, is perceived as Boris' return to clear consciousness. Groundedness and stability are facilitated by the tonic organ point, the descending scale of the complex A♭ major, and the abundance of consonant chords (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, end of second act (Boris's hallucinatory scene).



Boris is seized with intense confusion. In his death throes, he stands up to his full height, commanding the monks and boyars with a majestic gesture: 'Stop ... I am still king!' He then faints, whispering a final plea for forgiveness. The tonality of C major changes to a somber movement in D major (the final Largo). The scene concludes with choral sounds, where Boris's leitmotif and the ghost's chromaticism merge.[5] (Figure 11)

Figure 11: Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, fourth act (Boris's leitmotif).



[5] The chromatic descent in the final section of the monologue inevitably recalls the endings of the first movements of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

ISSN 1512-2018

For Godunov, against his will, an emerging virtual bearer of temporality emerges, a new sensory energy that threatens him and leads him to death: ‘Away, away... Not I... not I, your malefactor! Away, away, child!’. His internal conflict remains unresolved until death. It is only in

a brief orchestral code in D♭ major, based on the presentation of Boris's unfulfilled hopes against the backdrop of the orchestra's tremolo. The concluding stage of the monologue's development is the fading of the orchestral sound. This reflects Boris' complete loss of strength after such a powerful outburst.

Existentially, the opera's narrative reaches a tragic conclusion. According to Mussorgsky's conception, the bloody carnage, harsh and merciless, represents ‘God's judgment and God's retribution’. Grigory declares: ‘You cannot escape man's judgment, just as you cannot escape God's judgment. Boris' tragic fate was cathartic through his confession and death. He emerges as a tragic figure of solitude. Mussorgsky calls this the eschaton of history-the ultimate climax and culmination of human destiny.

Conclusion

Modest Mussorgsky's portrayal of Boris Godunov in his opera is a masterful blend of historical accuracy and deep psychological insight. Boris is depicted as a ruler consumed by his unrelenting quest for power yet tormented by the profound guilty of murdering Tsarevich Dmitry. This duality prevents a simple diagnosis of psychopathy or antisocial disorder, as Boris's guilt and remorse are palpably present throughout the opera.

Mussorgsky employs a sophisticated leitmotif system within the orchestration, allowing for a consistent and vivid portrayal of Boris's psychological transformation. This system follows a strict dramaturgical logic, ensuring that every musical element contributes to the narrative of Boris's descent into madness. The scenes of madness are characterised by dissonant harmonies, a lack of clear tonal centres, and abrupt tritones. The composer uses diminished seventh chords and augmented triads to heighten the sense of disarray and confusion. Additionally, the vocal parts in these scenes are composed of short, breathy phrases, punctuated by pauses, which serve to enhance the dramatic tension.

A significant technique Mussorgsky employs is the juxtaposition of Boris's fragmented, dissonant music with the more melodious and rhythmically stable episodes of other characters like Shuisky, Pimen, and Fyodor. This contrast highlights the protagonist's emotional turmoil and underscores his isolation from the rational world around him. Boris Godunov's madness is symbolised by his obsession with a bloody handprint, representing his guilt and the violent means by which he seized power. His hallucinations and ultimate breakdown serve as the pinnacle of expressionism in music, portraying a man completely overcome by his inner demons.

Boris's descent into madness and subsequent demise are depicted with an intensity that is both symbolic and deeply personal. The composer's own struggles with alcoholism and mental health resonate within Boris's character, adding a layer of tragic realism to the opera. Mussorgsky experienced his first bout of alcoholic fever in 1865, leading to his dismissal from employment. Over the years, his condition deteriorated due to loneliness, destitution, and chronic alcoholism. By the age of forty, Mussorgsky exhibited symptoms of delirium tremens, including clouded consciousness, anxiety, fear, visual hallucinations, and profuse sweating. Musicologists note that Boris's character absorbed elements of Mussorgsky's own life, marked by cycles of depression and creative highs.

The narrative of Boris's madness and death is enriched by detailed musical techniques. For instance, the first monologue, ‘Sorrows my soul’ draws its intonations from the composer's orchestral introduction to the opera. This leitmotif conveys the heavy inner turmoil of the Tsar, who has attained full power but is tormented by gloomy forebodings. The use of violins and violas in octaves, enriched by the sixth chord VI of the ‘Schubertian’ degree, adds expressiveness to the leitmotif, emphasising Boris's immersion into his inner world.

Boris's psychological state is further explored in the second act, where his monologue reflects on his sorrows and uncertainty as a ruler. The use of past tense verbs suggests that Boris's past actions are not appreciated or understood by his subjects. Mussorgsky alternates orchestral

ISSN 1512-2018
groups at short distances, not blending them, to create the impression of Boris's unbalanced state. His inner turmoil leads to hallucinations, with the theme consisting of rapidly accelerating seconds based on complex harmonies with distant functionality, such as being in a tritone interval relationship.

The motif of madness culminates in the fourth act, where Boris's internal conflict reaches its zenith. Tormented by pangs of conscience, he teeters on the brink of madness. His final monologue, delivered at the scene of his death, serves as the ultimate expression of the evolution of Godunov's character. Pimen's account of Dmitry's innocent murder serves as the immediate catalyst for Boris's agony, causing him to collapse unconscious. Echoes of the hallucination theme resurface, transforming Dmitry's ghost from a mere apparition into a tangible presence in Boris's imagination.

Mussorgsky's untimely death from alcoholism further underscores the poignancy of Boris Godunov's story. By 1865, Mussorgsky experienced his first bout of alcoholic fever, leading to his dismissal from employment. Over time, his condition deteriorated due to loneliness, destitution, and chronic alcoholism. By the age of forty, he exhibited symptoms of delirium tremens, including clouded consciousness, anxiety, fear, visual hallucinations, and profuse sweating. Musicologists note that Boris's character absorbed elements of Mussorgsky's own life, marked by cycles of depression and creative highs.

Human beings possess an inherent tendency towards self-destruction, a concept noted by Carl Jung in his study of archetypes. Mussorgsky's own battles with his inner demons, exacerbated by societal pressures and personal hardships, are mirrored in Boris's tragic arc. In 1881, Mussorgsky's health rapidly declined, culminating in paralysis and his eventual death in solitude on March 28th.

While scientific efforts focus on diagnosing and treating mental disorders, art provides a lens through which the cruelty of the external world can be explored. Through *Boris Godunov*, Mussorgsky offers a poignant commentary on the challenges of existence and the tragic insolubility of life, with music serving as a medium for catharsis and enlightenment.

In conclusion, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* stands as a powerful exploration of the psychological and existential struggles of its protagonist, enriched by the composer's own life experiences and profound understanding of the human condition. The opera's enduring appeal lies in its ability to evoke empathy and provoke thought, making it a seminal work in the operatic canon.

References:

1. Miller, C. The Evolution of Madness: *The Portrayal of Insanity in Opera*. The abstract of the dissertation, Eastern Kentucky University, 2015, p. 1.
2. Erfurth, A., & Hoff, P. Mad Scenes in Early 19th-century Opera. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 2000, 102, 310-313, p. 310.
3. Kirillina, L. *The Theatrical Vocation of Georg Friedrich Handel*. Moscow: Moscow Conservatory Press, 2019, p. 388.
4. Miller, C. The Evolution of Madness: *The Portrayal of Insanity in Opera*. The abstract of the dissertation, Eastern Kentucky University, 2015, p. 18.
5. Hinton, S. Die Sieben Todsünden. In book: *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. 3. Under edition Sadie, S. Retrieved from https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/page/the-new-grove-dictionary-of-opera (accessed September 21, 2023).
6. Adorno, T. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 190.
7. Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 27.
8. Miller, C. The Evolution of Madness: *The Portrayal of Insanity in Opera*. The abstract of the dissertation, Eastern Kentucky University, 2015, p. 11.
9. Cordingly, J. *Disordered Heroes in Opera*. Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2015, p. 9.
10. Foucault, M. *History of Madness*. London: Routledge, 2009, p. 168.
11. Huser, E. *Wahnsinn ergreift mich—ich rase! Die Wahnsinnsszene im Operntext*. The abstract of the dissertation, Freiburg, University of Freiburg, 2006, p. 11.
12. Lotman, Y. *Semiosphere, Culture and Explosion Inside Thinking Worlds*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 1992. p. 41.

ISSN 1512-2018
13. Layton, R. The Quintessential Russian Opera. In book: *Boris Godunov (Liner notes)*. Kirov: The Kirov Opera, 1998, p. 22.
14. Dahlhaus, C., Eggebrecht, H., & Gurlitt, W. (Eds.). *Riemann Musiklexikon* (12th ed.). Mainz: Schott Musik International GmbH & Co KG, 1967, p. 248.
15. Cordingly, J. *Disordered Heroes in Opera*. Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2015. p. 31.
16. Fay, L. *The Drama and Music of Boris. In book: Modest Mussorgsky*. Under edition Calder, J. London: Calder Publishing, 1982, p. 17.

Article received: 2024-09-24

Included 11 figures