

## The World of Childhood in Mussorgsky's Opera *Boris Godunov*

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I z a N e m i r o v s k a y a

Nearly 150 years have elapsed since the writing of opera *Boris Godunov*, but the comprehension of this masterpiece is still going on. Within the past decade alone, two academic volumes of Mussorgsky's Complete Works were published with their scientific editing based on the latest achievements in textual studies<sup>1</sup>, the opera's modern interpretations were offered in its recent productions in Russia and abroad, and music scholars still find out highly original shades of meaning in this composition that seems to have been scrutinized at great length.

The present article analyzes Mussorgsky's conception from an unexpected angle, which has virtually escaped the scholars' attention, namely, the dramaturgical connotation underlying the theme of childhood. Of course, children's images in this opera could not have been ignored altogether. These images have certainly been appraised but mainly in the inter-media plane, as a certain 'family interior' in "The Tsar's apartments in the Kremlin", hereinafter referred to as 'Terem', or as a vivid genre scene "Before St. Basil's Cathedral". Besides, great importance of these images was underlined for revealing Boris's double character or for highlighting sharp contrasts in the tsar's tragic state<sup>2</sup>. Also, some musicologists expressed their view that the images of Boris's children were essential for grasping the key message of the opera as "the pure side of his consciousness which punishes the other, criminal, side of this personality" (R. K. Shirinian)<sup>3</sup>.

But the genuine multifarious essence of scenes with children in the Terem and in the opera as a whole failed to be fully evaluated up to the recent times. In our view, as an integral system organically inscribed into the general message of the tragedy and as its essential component, it was presented only in the publication of *Muzykalnaya akademiya* journal, Issue 1 for 2009<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> M. P. Mussorgsky. *Boris Godunov*. First edition. 1869. Score. / Edited by E. Levashev. Vol. 1: Moscow, 1996. Vol. 2: Mainz, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Shirinian, R. *Mussorgsky's Operatic Dramaturgy*. Moscow: 1981, p. 134; Golovinsky, G., Sabinina, M. *Modest P. Mussorgsky*. Moscow: 1998, p. 376.

<sup>3</sup> Shirinian R. *Ibid.* p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> See: Nemirovskaya, I. A. *The Theme of Childhood in Mussorgsky's Opera Boris Godunov* – "Muzykalnaya akademiya" journal, 2009, No. 1.

As a matter of fact, childishness runs through the entire composition, being demonstrated the most diverse aspects. It embraces the really acting live characters (Fyodor, boys in the scene with the Simpleton and the blind pilgrims' guides) and the mythologized imagery of the murdered tsarevich and, partly, of the tsar's children in their father's ideal perception. Childishness penetrates into the characteristics of adults — the Simpleton and Boris. For the sole light spot in Godunov's soul is associated with his children; like an islet of purity and kindness, it is also linked up with the children's aspect (up to tonal relationships). Finally, children being pure at heart are open to the supreme truth and granted with the gift of prophecy (in the spirit of evangelical gospel "*Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God*" [St. Matthew, 5: 8]).

At the same time prince Shuisky exploits ruthlessly the children's factor in his political struggle against the Tsar while the Pretender stealing the name of the Uglich victim profanely uses it for making a breathtaking career.

The main cluster of tragic developments unfolds around the murdered boy. The latter is all the time on somebody's lips, being inscribed in the most essential dramaturgical lines: Dimitri/Boris, Dimitri/the people, Dimitri/the Pretender, and Dimitri (as the voice of historical truth)/Pimen.

The emotional and spiritual spectrum of children's characteristics ranges from *holiness* (children acting as the blind pilgrims' guides) to *heartless cruelty* (boys in the scene with the Simpleton). The children concentrate both the best and the worst qualities inherent in human nature. Their emotions are most expressive whereas their inhibiting centres are still undeveloped.

Their life is closely interlinked with the adults' lives while the light of childhood heightens all the dramatic conflicts of the opera, including the confrontation of light with the merciless darkness of life.

Without trying to present the entire system of dramaturgical connotations underlying the children's imagery in the opera's conception, let us focus only on its aspect directly related with the characteristic of Tsar Boris.

A short prologue to the story about a parrot highlights the importance of the children's theme in Mussorgsky's conception. Let us remind that this scene has been wholly inserted into Pushkin's plot by the composer to enhance the idea about sin and retribution. Immediately, without any break, to continue the theme of nightmares (the ending of Boris's monologue) there follows a frightening episode with the bird that tears itself away with heart-rending yells ("*Oh, my god, shoo! Oh, shoo, shoo! Gracious! Shoo! Shoo! Oh! Shoo! Shoo! Shoo! Ah, how dreadful!*"). The loud cries heard from all the sides are tonally ingrained in the leading motive of hallucinations

and clearly associated with a funeral dirge<sup>5</sup>. “Eh, *how they are fighting!*”— Boris exclaims “*in great irritation*” (Figure 54). This wail added to Godunov’s high-strung state caused by the pangs of guilty conscience could also imply the weeping for his own self.

In the context of the tsar’s nightmares, upon facing the apparition of the bloodstained child and, particularly, after the words “*You can hear his cries in his death agony*”, the nurses’ wail can be perceived in the sick consciousness of the main character as his terror at the revived murder. In the same context their blood must arouse in the tsar the association with the other blood: “*and in the darkness of night the bloodstained kid is standing up...*” At any rate, the tragic idioms infuse the prologue and the entire middle section of the story about the parrot: “*Suddenly the bird ran up to the nurse who did not want to scratch him and started to peck her over and over again so that she crushed down to the floor*”<sup>6</sup>.

Hence, in his covert struggle for power Vassily Shuisky makes a brilliant use of the thoughts about the innocently murdered Dimitri, which drives Boris to the fits of hallucinations (Terem) and eventually to his death (Granovitaya Chamber).

In this respect we should point to one of Mussorgsky’s remarkable dramaturgical findings. It consists in creating the sensation of reality, an exceptional clearness in depicting the corpse identification at Uglich (Shuisky’s story; Terem, beginning with Figure 92). Yet, the excessively dispassionate and unctuous voice and the unwarranted ‘piety’ of the courtier’s arioso-like declamatory tonality make one to be on the alert<sup>7</sup>. Along with the stage remark that specifies: “*lamentably while approaching Boris, almost humming in an undertone while watching Boris*”, all of which makes the listener, but not the high-strung Boris, to distrust the prince’s sincerity. The sickly sweet tonality in describing the details of the investigation (“*the thirteen emaciated corpses were lying in blood and dirty rags, and their decay was already visible*” and so on) creates the strongest impression and fatally affects Boris, up to the clouding of his mind (“*in my eyes... the bloodstained child is standing up*”)<sup>8</sup>.

The sensation of hearing authentic facts is further enhanced by a tonal similarity between the provoking narrative and Dimitri’s leading motive, while the image of a dead child seeming

<sup>5</sup> Chromaticism of the musical texture, the accent on augmented triads, chords with inserted tritone structures.

<sup>6</sup> The sounds of pecks’ are marked with grace-notes, altered DD, sudden elliptic turns (A-dur, D<sub>7</sub>→(D), D<sub>7</sub>→(As), D<sub>7</sub>→Des, D<sub>7</sub>→(D); D<sub>7</sub>→(Ges), D<sub>7</sub>→(C), D<sub>7</sub>→F-dur), as well as with chromatic spirals resembling the nurses’ wail and, respectively, and the theme of hallucinations (beginning with the words “*It is no accident that the parrot has pecked each nurse.*”).

<sup>7</sup> The proximity to church music rendered mainly in diatonics, the same choral type of texture along with even rhythms and softly rounded melodic turns, aloofness of high register sonority in the statement of Dimitri’s motto theme.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to emphasize that Pimen’s story about a blind shepherd’s cure at the tomb of the holy child was expressly planned by Shuisky for the moment of inflicting the last blow (Granovitaya Chamber).

to have just falling asleep becomes clearly visible owing to the inclusion of lullaby-like qualities: “*He seems to be sleeping peacefully in his cradle, with his small arms folded and a toy held in his right hand...*” But all the more is unbearable a striking contrast between the physiologically terrifying context abounding in naturalistic details and the peaceful picture of the holy child’s deadly sleep<sup>9</sup>.

All the dramaturgic lines in the tragedy of Pushkin and Mussorgsky (Boris’s guilt, the people’s position, the story of Dimitri the Pretender) are interlinked with the fate of *Tsar Ioann’s son*. Therefore, his image is most significant among the children’s musical characteristics. It expresses the mythologized notion about the holy child as a martyr, whose theme is tonally close to the Russian drawn-out song. This angle of the people’s eternal ideal is perceived as an embodiment of the romantic dream about a just tsar as a kind messenger chosen by God. But he was killed. And the murdered kid turned into a holy martyr who would pray in the heaven for all the unjustly offended.

Perhaps, the most lucid version of the theme is presented in Pimen’s story about a shepherd, blind since birth, restoring his sight at the child’s tomb. The sonority of the voice uttering “*You should know, old man, I’m tsarevich Dimitri*” is set off in high register combined with major diatonic keys and the strings’ tremolo, some elements of modality, a gentle color of contrasting A-Des, and the very semantics of love tonality in Des (Granovitaya Chamber, Figure 44). It is significant that the tsarevich’s motto theme grows out from the theme of Pimen, the monk. The child’s words “*Stand up, old man, go to the town of Uglich and enter the Cathedral of Transfiguration*” break out strikingly in D-dur used instead of d-moll (Figure 39).

Lexically similar is one of the key recurrences of this motto theme at the appearance of Boris in the Tsar’s Duma. Glimmering in the height (with modal alternations of Ces, Ces and es), it is perceived as a dim mystic vision of the half-mad tsar, as a faint hope for a miracle that might

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<sup>9</sup> It should be added that, as compared with Pushkin, this contrast was accentuated in Mussorgsky’s literary text, where it became all the more ‘crying’ owing to the introduction of children’s entourage. The composer literally ‘draws’ a picture of childhood interrupted by a murder, underlining the details of the kid’s sleep. In Pushkin’s text we read the following: “*The features of his face have not changed. No, Your Majesty, there is no doubt: it is Dimitri who is lying in the coffin*”. To quote Mussorgsky, “*The features of his face have not changed: he seems to be sleeping peacefully in his cradle, with his small arms folded and a toy held in his right hand...*” (The first version included one more word: “*a whirligig toy...*”). Mussorgsky’s talent as a stage director enhances the visibility of some other pictures as well. As regards the present study, let us mention the phrase about “bloodstained boys” (in the scene with chimes). Pushkin: “*I’m feeling sick and giddy, seeing the bloodstained boys...*” Mussorgsky: “*I’m feeling giddy... Seeing the bloodstained kid! Over there ... Over there ... what is it? There, in the corner... fluttering... growing... approaching... trembling and groaning... (In recitative): Bags, bags it, it’s not me ... I’m not your evildoer! (In recitative): Bags, bags it, the kid! It’s not me! People... People’s will ... Bags it, kid!*” To the end of Boris’s monologue “I have attained the highest power”, the composer adds the following to Pushkin’s text: “*And I can’t even sleep, and in the dark of night the bloodstained child is standing up... His eyes are gleaming, clasping his small hands, he is asking for mercy... (In a muffled voice): And there was no mercy! A terrible wound is gaping! A cry in his death agony is heard*” (Terem).

take off the weight of a mortal sin: “*Who says: murderer? There is no one! The kid is alive, living*” (Figure 27).

All the above is akin to the music associated in the opera with the incarnation of spiritual purity and faith.

The sphere of kids' purity embraces the *indirect characteristic of Godunov's children*, shown in his attitude towards them and, most clearly, in the theme of paternal love. In the perception of Boris their image is ideal. His motto theme is tinged in tender emotions and sheer delight. In the tsar's lips the sounding of this theme differs cardinally from the style of his speech addressed to other persons, common people or used in his private deliberations, since his children are his sole comfort and solace.

Its first emergence stands out in the tragic context of the scene delivered in major diatonic keys with soft mediant tone colors ( $II^5_6$ ,  $VI^4_6$ ,  $II^3_4$  and  $D_6$ ,  $VI_7$ ) and plastic cadences (harmonic suspensions, melodious sixth chords, and the refined subdominant ‘flourishing’ in the theme; Terem, Figure 12). But the most striking contrast with the surrounding musical texture is presented in the tragic monologue “I have attained the highest power”. It is love for children that in fact forms the sole islet of light in Boris's mournful mood and his tragic perception of the world (“*Neither life, power, nor a delusion of glory, nor the crowd's joyful cries can cheer me up <...> The long arm of the stern judge is hard, the verdict announced to a criminal soul is terrifying*”; Figure 46).

The image of the tsar's children (the same as the image of the murdered kid) is mythologized (in their father's perception). It is shown through the elevating sentiment living in the tortured soul of a deadly suffering man. The dramaturgic chain integrates “The idolization of Dimitri murdered by Boris”<sup>10</sup>, all the more so as he was killed mainly for the sake of the future sinless reign of his children.

This conceptual solution is realized through a crucial tonal cluster interconnecting musical poetics of the dead and living heirs to the throne (diatonics, modality, predominant plagality, a characteristic interrupted melodic turn D-VI). The tonal similarity of both images also coincides with the depiction of the spiritual world. Lexically, these themes are close to Pimen's motto theme<sup>11</sup>. Their affinity is particularly noticeable when the chronicler mentions holy tsars: “*Oh, how often they have changed their regal scepter, purple clothes, and their sumptuous crown for the monk's humble headgear*” (G-dur; Monastic cell, Figure 25). Their kinship, together with

<sup>10</sup> Shirinian, R. Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Their interconnection with Dimitri's theme has been mentioned above. Besides, the theme of paternal love reveals a similar melodic type, choral character, and the accent on passing harmonies. Tonally, these themes are also kindred: Pimen's main tone color is D-dur; the initial exposition of Boris's love theme is in G-dur (Terem, Figure 38).

Pimen's words about Russian autocrats, underscores the opera's topical idea about historical continuity of power granted by God, going on from the past to future rulers. At the same time, it focuses one's attention on Boris's constant reflections on the legitimacy of this power for him personally and for his children.

By their nature the tsar's feelings for the Almighty, His saints and his own children, the very quality of sacrificial, selfless love, have Divine origins<sup>12</sup>. It is with high reverence that the tsar addresses his "sovereign father", "the righteous" Fyodor Ioannovich (the coronation scene, Figure 16) or his son where the motto theme of love tonally grows out from the following phrase: "*Stand guard over the righteous faith, worship God's saints*" (the death scene, Figure 55)<sup>13</sup>.

Paternal love reaches the heights of praying, Christian sacrifice and holiness in the scene of Godunov's death: "*Oh, my Lord! I beg you to look at the tears of the sinful father! Oh, my God, I'm not praying for myself, not for myself!*" The specific semantic coloring of this theme (and of the actual prayer "*From the inaccessible heavens*") is highlighted primarily by church modality. Its glowing purity is stressed by the highest register, the accent placed on T<sup>6</sup> (in the orchestra), and the semantics of Ges-dur<sup>14</sup>. The moments of direct addresses to God are marked off by the recitative progressions of fourths in free rhythms: "*The hosts of heaven! The guards of eternity!*"

Self-renunciation in this love is infinite, the same as in Pushkin's Boris who addresses his heir on the threshold of death: "*But I'm feeling, my son, you are dearer to me than my own salvation.*" Mussorgsky attaches particular importance to the last intimate words of love: "*Let you protect with your lucid wings my dear child from misfortunes and evils, from temptations...*" The heavenly in Boris's soul is conveyed by a gamut of musical poetic devices: the highest register,

<sup>12</sup> It has already been noticed that the musical idioms used in characterizing the spiritual world and Boris's love for his children have much in common.

<sup>13</sup> The associative fund of tonalities, an essential device of Mussorgsky's works, plays an important part. The episode from Boris's death scene is marked by the semantics **as** and **Des** ("the love tonality" in 19<sup>th</sup>-century music), passing into **As**. The episode from the coronation scene is rendered in the **As** tonality. The dramaturgical meaning of **As-dur** in the opera lies in the characteristic of purity and love. The key moments of its ringing include the chorus of blind pilgrims' guides, Pimen's motto theme in his dialogue with Grigory ("*Think, my son, about the great tsars*"; Monastic cell, Figure 24), the motto theme of paternal love in Boris's monologue ("*I hoped to find comfort in my family*"; Terem, Figure 46) and in the death scene ("*Take care, my son, of the tsarevna, your sister, you are left her only guardian*"; Granovitaya Chamber, Figure 56). The semantic role of **As** and **Des** (the same as of the kindred **Ges**) also lies in the interconnection of human and divine love. It is no accident that **Des** appears in Pimen's story about an unheard-of miracle at the moment of the tsar Fyodor Ioannovich's death ("*The chambers have got filled with fragrance... And his face like the sun lit up!*"; Monastic cell, Figure 30), and his story about another miracle with the shepherd recovering his sight ("*God has acknowledged me as one of his angels and now I'm a miracle-worker of Great Russia*"; Granovitaya Chamber, Figure 39), as well as in the symphonic general conclusion of Boris's death scene signifying the moment of redemption, divine absolution and reconciliation (Figure 69). At the same time, in all the above cases **Des** stresses the idea about the possible existence of the tsar's just power, which is linked in Boris's mind with the legitimacy of his son's future reign.

<sup>14</sup> A rare loftiness and transparency of this tonal coloring has got its historically stable importance, as exemplified by the scenes of Violetta's death, the death scenes of Aida and Radames in Verdi's operas, etc.

*ppp*, tremolo, whispering recitative of the dying man departing to God (in one, rarely in two tones), the gentlest pulsation of T-D in the organ-point and, certainly, the love tonality in Des-dur.

One of the composer's remarkable conceptual solutions expressing the cherished dream of Boris as a tsar and as a human being about his children's future lies in a significant transformation of Fyodor's motto theme. Tonally, coming close to the theme of paternal love, it "straightens up" its harmony and sounds brightly and proudly. Godunov's key goal appears to be realized in his dreams before his decease when he seems to see his son on the throne: "*You will reign in jure*" (G-dur, diatonics; T<sup>6</sup> instead of the minor leading tone)<sup>15</sup>.

Nowhere else in Mussorgsky's compositions you encounter such sacrificial grandeur, such heights and powers of love of a strong personality and an unhappy man, a love gained through much suffering on the Via Crucis. Once having embarked on this way, the tsar had to bear his cross through all its torments to the very end<sup>16</sup>.

This anguish of his soul terrified by the committed evil is also linked with the theme of childhood. It haunts Boris to his last minutes, which is expressed, particularly, in the composer's exceptional and unexpected dramaturgical finding: the introduction into Pushkin's plot of monks' background singing that comes from afar. The words of their praying seem to be totally out of place during the funeral service for the tsar. Their prayer concerns the murdered kid, that is, the only thought that cannot be overcome by the man departing for the other world. Shaking Godunov to the innermost of his heart, though most likely he seems to hear these words in his imagination, as the thought about a mortal sin haunts him, shouting out from everywhere: "*I see a dying kid, and I'm sobbing and weeping as he is tossing about and shuddering while calling for help, but there is no salvation for him*"<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> In the same semantic context and in the same vein, Fyodor's leading theme is delivered by Boris following the story about a parrot: "*Oh, I wish I could see you as a tsar*" (Act 2; the scene in the Tsar's Terem; Figure 67).

<sup>16</sup> It is symptomatic that in the first edition, to portray Boris's tragic state, the orchestra repeatedly states the theme of the Cross: in Boris's monologue "I have attained the highest power" (Terem) and in the scene of Shuisky telling the boyars' Duma about the tsar driving off the ghost of the murdered kid (Granovitaya Chamber). See: *Golovinsky G., Sabinina M.* Ibid. p. 375.

<sup>17</sup> The composer's dramaturgical finding is so universal in its implication that it allows for its most varied interpretations. From the viewpoint of musical dramaturgy, it is significant that at the moment of praying the monks are coming to the front stage, which makes their singing sound all the more terrifying and scary (the initial *pp* replaced by *mf*, *f* and *ff* at the words "*and there is no salvation*" [for the kid – *I. N.*]). For the dramaturgical role of monks' small choirs, their import as "a mouthpiece of Christian moral imperative, a commentator of events, and prophecy" (in the scene of Boris's death, and in the monastery of Chudov), see: *Golovinsky, G., Sabinina, M.* Ibid. pp. 368-369; *Sabinina, M.* Drama of Conscience and Its Denouement in *Boris Godunov* // "Sovetskaya muzyka" journal, 1993, No. 1.

So, the children's theme ties up in a tight knot both paternal love and the murder of a little tsarevich.

Here arises the following question: why is the children's factor to accentuate a sin leading to Boris's death? It may seem that something different could also be used for this purpose since the unhappy tsar had to endure a lot of other hardships in his life. But there is nothing fortuitous in the dramaturgy of Pushkin and Mussorgsky; both of them came to face here a profound spiritual problem, having shown childishness not in general but as the incarnation of the best qualities intrinsic in little creatures — their sincerity, trustfulness, and openness for the world and people at large; in the final analysis, purity and holiness in their Christian understanding. Under this approach, evil in a direct confrontation with holiness is always exposed and punished. In their conflict the spiritual outcome is predetermined: purity wins over evil, which eventually leads to complete ruin<sup>18</sup>.

Yet, the conflict between the heavenly and the earthly in the tsar's soul ends in the victory of the divine. In the symphonic general conclusion, the theme of Godunov's good intentions in the scene of his death sounds brightly and unearthly, rising from the gloomiest orchestral depths to the heavens, signifying atonement for the sin through repentance, faith and love. His paternal love and self-renunciation (*"Oh, my God, I'm not praying for myself, not for myself!"*) reconcile Boris in his last minutes with God and his own conscience, taking away the unbearable torments from his soul.

This is Mussorgsky's solution of the focal cosmic conflict between the earthly and the Heavenly in the heart of his main character and, in a broader sense, of this whole conception. Delineated by the remark "dead silence", it is colored in the opera by its main tonal sphere — by the grand sonority of Des-Ges, semantically associated with self-renunciation for the sake of paternal love<sup>19</sup>. In this way the composer underlines the redemptive power of love.

The unquestionable importance of the children's theme for the opera's conception is emphasized by the fact that the composer specifically introduces the scenes of plays and amusements, missing in Pushkin's drama, and having an essential meaning in the opera's dramaturgy (the Tsar's Terem). What is more, Mussorgsky makes a wide use of the texts and,

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<sup>18</sup> The incompatibility of a crime and the gospel truth is one of the main, if not the focal idea of Mussorgsky's opera. It underlies many Russian masterpieces created by Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoi, et al.

<sup>19</sup> *"Let you protect with your lucid wings my dear child from misfortunes and evils, from temptations..."* (Des-dur); the prayer *"From the inaccessible heavens shed Your light full of divine grace on my dear children"* (Ges-dur); a dream told to his son *"I wish I could see you as a tsar of the Russian empire, I would be delighted to give up all the temptations of power and change the tsar's scepter for this bliss"* (Des-Ges).



partly, intonations, of authentic children's songs, humorous catchphrases and counting-out rhymes. As it turns out, the chief point lies here in the characteristic of *tsarevich Fyodor*, given in several planes: a direct picture of the immature youth and the portrayal of a future autocrat. All of this is accompanied by tragic prophecies rendered in the comically playful vein, in the spirit of Pushkin ending his fairy tales with the words: "The story's false; but in it lies some truth, seen but by inward eyes".

Gentleness and trustfulness are felt in a tall tale told by the tsarevich, its intonations being identical to folk tales (similar to a *cock-and-bull tale*; Figure 22)<sup>20</sup>.

Singular gentle tenderness permeates the beginning of Fyodor's story about a parrot, imbued with general transparency of the texture and fanciful rhetorical melodic turns akin to a folk song, modal and metric alternations, and whimsical anhemitonics ("Our dear parrot was sitting with nurses in the front room"; Figure 60)<sup>21</sup>.

At the same time, junior Godunov is depicted as a future autocrat scanning "a map of the Russian empire". His motto theme offers a chamber version of the pealing bells from Boris's coronation scene as a sign of the divine origins (grand major keys, the ringing of dissonant chords united in common sonority: II<sub>7</sub>[harm.]-III<sub>2</sub>-D<sup>3</sup><sub>4</sub>; Figure 40).

The tsarevich's image also involves the moments of involuntary prophecies anticipating the tragic denouement in the story about Tsar Boris, his children and his people. A popular saying "the truth comes out of the mouths of babes and sucklings" seems to be indeed realized, though in the figurative way, through innocent amusements (the story about a parrot) and plays: a clapping game and a nursery song about a gnat appear not to portend bad times ahead. But these initially harmless episodes unfold into "terrible bloody (in the literal sense of the word) narratives".

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<sup>20</sup> These intonations include the simplest melody, harmony, the texture imitating the strumming of chords on the squeeze-box (T-D with the pedal of fifths in high voice, variable tonality D-dur-A-dur, alternation of modalities – major with higher fourth degree and natural major: D-dur with *gis* or with *g*). The literary text has been borrowed from humorous catchphrases and counting-out rhymes ("Tu-ru-ru, little cock", "Ting, ting, ting", *Jingle, jingle, tinkledrum*, etc.). The common stylistic solution of the fairy tale, its genesis, as well as the character of imitating the squeeze-box and the thematic type of melodic harmonies have anticipated some creative trends in Stravinsky's style (for instance, the song of slightly drunk chaps in Scene 1 of his ballet *Petrushka*). For details of folk sources in *Boris Godunov*, see: *Golovinsky, G. Mussorgsky and Folklore*. Moscow: 1994. All the dividing figures are indicated here and hereinafter according to the piano score edited by Pavel A. Lamm.

<sup>21</sup> This story arouses Boris's admiration: "How artfully, how briskly, how simply and ingeniously, you have managed to describe a funny case."

These episodes are based on the genre of a ballad, treated by Mussorgsky in a highly original manner, in a childlike naïve and parody-like vein (the same as in the songs “Cat the Sailor” and “Setting off on a stick” from his unfinished cycle *In the country house*)<sup>22</sup>.

Like in serious literary and musical ballads, the heroes here enter into conflicting relations: the parrot/the tsar’s nurses (the story about a parrot), constables/a deacon (a clapping game), and dragonflies/a gnat and a bug (the song about a gnat). This leads to the ballad-like “fatal blows” turning into physical strikes: the parrot pecks Nastasya and all the other nurses, Nastasya hurts herself in falling and then in her resentment she clacks the parrot on the neck (the story about a parrot), the deacon falls down from the stove (a clapping game), the gnat finds himself under a heavy log (the song about a gnat). The “moral” blows are no less funny: the parrot’s grudge against the nurse Nastasya who refused to scratch his head, the grudge of the nurse Nastasya against the parrot who called her a fool (the story about a parrot). All of this involves damages or complete ruin of household items: broken threshing flails, the deacon’s barn catching fire, his fancy loaves and cattle consumed by the constables (a clapping game), and flooded meadows and spoilt hay (the song about a gnat). “Tragic” endings of these stories are similar to the ballads’ denouements: the bloodstained tsar’s nurses (the story about a parrot), devastation of the deacon’s house (a clapping game), the gnat’s severe injury and the bug’s death (the song about a gnat).

These scenes are permeated with typical ballad-like tone-painting: descending intonations in the deacon’s falling (a clapping game), the motives of “pecks” in the episode of “the parrot’s revenge” (the story about a parrot), the racing rhythm in the dragonflies’ attack on “the deacon’s meadows”, a stream of chromatic lamento accompanying the groans of the dying bug (the song about a gnat). These scenes are marked by symphonic development creating a typical genre suspense expressed in the increasing tempo (a clapping game), complicated modal harmonic language, crescendo, thickening texture, and the expanding of register diapason.

As regarding the childhood theme in the opera’s conception, the principle of increasing interrelated “misfortunes” draws particular attention: the blow by a log which the gnat was going to inflict on the dragonflies in revenge for the deacon’s devastated meadows breaks his ribs. This happening brings about a greater disaster since the bug striving to save the gnat perishes himself: “*overstrained himself... and yielded up the ghost*” (the song about a gnat). Quite fanciful (to quote the tsarevich who exclaims, “*What a tale! Starting on a merry note, but finishing on a sad*

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<sup>22</sup> For the song-cycle *In the Country House* in this respect, see: *Nemirovskaya, I.A. Mussorgsky’s Forgotten Song-Cycle // Russian Music from the Middle Ages up to the Present Day. Issue 1 / Edited and compiled by M.G. Aranovsky. Moscow: 2004.*

one!”), this tale conveys the following didactic message: “Don’t do to others what you don’t want to be done to yourself.” It contains an explicit allegory, like in a small crystal, it reflects the opera’s main idea: a committed sin entails a chain of tragic aftereffects. Retribution for the murder catches up with Godunov, his children, his subjects and, eventually, Russia as a whole.

In some respect by its role in the entire dramaturgy (and partly, by its musical poetics: es-moll, altered DD [“the chord of death” with Tchaikovsky]) the song about a gnat is evocative of Pauline’s romance in *The Queen of Spades*. The same as with Tchaikovsky, for all similarity with an interlude, this tale falls out from the general context<sup>23</sup>. It makes one ponder...

Another direct, most realistic, picture of children is drawn in a short, but deeply tragic scene of *boys* taking away the kopeck from the Simpleton (Before St. Basil’s Cathedral). Drawn by Mussorgsky in meticulous detail, it displays his profound knowledge of human psychology and his artistically accurate delineation of “the tonal script”<sup>24</sup>. As compared with Pushkin, the image of the boys is enlarged, intensifying its negative aspects. The poet depicts the greetings of Nikolka, a holy fool, as the imps’ wicked pranks whereas the composer regards it as a cruel joke of a helpless man. It serves to demonstrate their power and superiority, one of the few chances the young “heroes” have for their self-assertion<sup>25</sup>.

Their tiny choral scene is marked by an alternation of genre sources in each section of three-part form: a teasing rhyme — jeering praise — the same teasing rhyme but accompanied by beats on the fool’s iron cap. The growth of aggression is expressed by crescendo typically used by Mussorgsky in similar cases<sup>26</sup>. The musical developments unfold in full conformity with the dramatic action: the boys’ voices can be heard from afar (behind the scene) — “the heroes’ entry” (running along with yelling) — jeering praise — the culmination point of manhandling (though quite innocent, assaulting only the fool’s iron cap).

<sup>23</sup> Owing to its specific tone color (es-moll), modal variety (minor with higher fourth and fifth degrees) and the unconventionally ringing tense harmonic texture (the accent placed on augmented triads and altered DD, an abundance of converging and diverging chromatic lines of voices, often with cross relations).

<sup>24</sup> See: *Nemirovskaya, I.* “The Tonal Script” in Mussorgsky’s Chamber Song-Cycles // “Keldysh Recitals – 2006”. Timed for the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of I.V. Nestyev. Reports. Lectures. Articles / Compiled by N.G. Shakhnazarova, edited by S.K. Lashchenko. Moscow: 2007.

<sup>25</sup> The prototype of this scene is the song “A Mischievous Child”.

<sup>26</sup> For example, like in “The First Punishment” or in the song “A Mischievous Child”. But here it is given in miniature (the boys’ choral singing totals 16 bars: seven before the Simpleton’s song and nine after it). By its elaboration of details and, partly, by its compositional procedure (a wavelike principle: appearance – the main section – exit from the stage) the boys’ choir from *Boris Godunov* can be associated with the boys’ choir in *Carmen* created a bit later (1875). But the substantive mode of these refined miniatures is absolutely different: with Bizet, the children imitating the adults are engaged in a peaceful game. Bizet was followed by Tchaikovsky who continued to pursue the same line of playing a game of tin soldiers in the form of an exquisite operatic choral miniature (*The Queen of Spades*, 1890).

The initial episode combines the childlike naive intonations of a teasing rhyme and pattering with tragic procedures. The melodic rhythmic figure, similar to Beethoven's "motto theme of fate"<sup>27</sup>, is heightened by resounding scansion and tough repetition of the "accusatory words" in high register: "*Whoa, there! Hey, there, the Iron Cap!*" The seething of chromatic passages, especially in the culminating phrase "*Halloo! Tally-ho! Whoa, there!*" (with its tritone feature and the squealing major seventh in the chorus), is akin to the theme of Boris's hallucinations. In our view, it is not fortuitous. The boys' behavior reveals some wild, barbaric customs discordant with the normal ways of life.

The moment of "flicking on the cap" (the composer's stage remark) is complemented by the same motto themes of fate with the teasing effect of tritone accompaniment, "whistling" tirades in high register — you seem to hear the ringing of iron: "*Ting, ting, ting, ting. Hear how it is ringing!*"

The jeering greeting "*Hello, hello, Simpleton Ivanych!*" makes a parody of the intonations used for "Glory" in the scene of Boris's coronation (the French horn's progressions of major sixths, fifths and thirds in the chorus, the initial melodic turn).

### **Example 1**

Mussorgsky has expanded Pushkin's scene and thereby heightened the importance of the children's theme in the opera. The yelling phrase "*Take off the cap! The cap is heavy!*"<sup>28</sup> is underlined by typical motifs of teasing mimicry (ascending short progressions of legato with the accent on the first tone in the context of general staccato). One can easily visualize a malicious expression on the faces and the sticking of one's tongue out.

Thus, through the children's behavior Mussorgsky depicts the psychology of the mob, first making nasty advances but soon falling upon its victim. It is shown in the scene of glorifying the boyar Khrushchov and — at the last stage of fierce violence — in the chorus "The valor of a young man has gone on the loose" (the forest of Kromy). The composer clearly accentuates the interconnection of these episodes (in their connotation, composition and musical language). In-between there arises a through wavelike crescendo at a distance. In its connotation, it is united by the maturation of participants in the riot and the growth of their lust for blood; in composition, by the enlargement of a children's miniature to the vast scene delivered in the symphonic vein; and in musical poetics, by the complication of idioms used to express rampant aggression. In this way

<sup>27</sup> The persistent repetition of one tone in the choral part with the subsequent descending diminished fourth. The introduction of this motif as a tragic symbol is Mussorgsky's favorite device. It is quite significant in his works, including his music for children (for example, "In the corner" from the song-cycle *The Nursery*).

<sup>28</sup> This phrase and the preceding one "*Stand up and greet us by bowing low to us*" are both missing in Pushkin's text.

the composer demonstrates by artistic means an essential law of psychology suggesting that children's unrestraint and cruelty could have terrible consequences<sup>29</sup>.

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In some way or another the theme of childhood is directly linked with many key dramaturgical lines of the opera, including hard unscrupulousness of a political intrigue.

The theme of a tsarevich tortured to death is inseparable from the line of *the Pretender*. The versions of “counter-motto themes” (the term coined by Marina D. Sabinina<sup>30</sup>) present a striking contrast between the divine light of humility and men's violent ambitions, mildness and forcefulness, peace and bellicose aggression<sup>31</sup>.

This seemingly obvious dramaturgic solution such as characterization of the antagonistic heroes by the same motto theme signifies an extraordinary situation: usurpation of the *murdered child's* name for attaining an infamous goal<sup>32</sup>.

In the context of the idea about the martyr kid, it becomes clear why his theme is tonally linked with the characteristics of not only Pimen, but also the Simpleton and the blind pilgrims' guides. A strong influence exerted by the poetics of church genres or spiritual verses is conveyed here by their common features such plagality, predominant diatonics, modality in its relation to the major/minor system, and often by a specific turn of D-S. As Marina Sabinina writes, “The orthodox church and quasi-church chants were regarded by Mussorgsky as quite an essential

<sup>29</sup> See: *Nemirovskaya, I.* Reflection of the Child Psychology in Mussorgsky's Works // Topical problems in modern music: composition, performing arts, education / Compiled and edited by E.R. Skurko. Ufa: 2008.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 369.

<sup>31</sup> Though the Pretender's description differs (for instance, in the scenes by the fountain and at Kromy), this contrasting is always diametrically opposite. It is accomplished primarily by using dynamic, textural orchestral and genre devices (the predominance of *p* and *pp* — *f* and *ff*; the transparency of musical texture, the leading role of strings or woodwinds — the large-scale tutti with the accent on the brass instruments; song-like and chorale features displayed in the active triumphant marching vein). See also: *Keldysh, Y.* Modest Mussorgsky // History of Russian Music. Part 2. Moscow/Leningrad: 1947, pp. 156-157; *Golovinsky, G., Sabinina, M.* *Ibid.* p. 370.

<sup>32</sup> In view of the indissoluble kinship of these images, the present author would like to add something to the known attitudes to the Pretender's musical portrayal. To my mind, for Mussorgsky's conception it is most important to transform a motto theme by imparting it national traits and by introducing rhythmic intonations of “the Polish act with chorus” into Dimitri's purely Russian theme (for example: “*Rushing at full speed at the head of the prince's brave armed force*” and “*In the morning we are going into battle at the head of courageous armed forces*” – By the fountain, figures **48**, **68**; “*Follow us in the glorious battle!*” - Kromy, Figure **70**). The same trends are evident in the marching of the Pretender's troops (Kromy, four bars after Figure **63**). Such transformations logically end in a cardinal renovation of the theme, the introduction of a specific harmonic language akin to “polonaise” with intricate new modal interlinks of major and minor keys (Kromy, beginning with Figure **64**). A culmination point of this specific dramaturgical line is the substitution of the Russian language for Latin. This finding of Mussorgsky clearly symbolizes treachery of the faith, the motherland, and of the moral, spiritual and religious principles. Latin in the mouth of Polish Jesuits along with the allusion to the Catholic prayer “Deo Gloria” horrifies the crowd: “*Howling like the wolves!*” The appended stage remark “*Every one, except the Simpleton, follows the Pretender*” is perceived all the more tragically. Very likely, it is no less hopeless than Pushkin's words “*The people remain silent.*”

component, as part and parcel of fundamental popular world-views, as ‘indicators’ in the moral appraisal of man’s actions and thoughts”<sup>33</sup>.

Sanctity as a spiritual guideline and a specific type of the children’s factor as a manifestation of holiness, this idea has been accentuated by the composer by inserting a scene of *the blind pilgrims’ guides* at the Novodevichy Monastery, which is missing in Pushkin’s text. The chorus’s language is reminiscent of the idioms used for creating the image of the little tsarevich. Transparent timbres of the boys’ voices, high register in *pp*, diatonics and modal alternation (*As-f*), the simplest texture, pedaling on *es*<sup>2</sup>, akin to the hand-bell’s pealing, all of this seems to ascend to heavens.

A direct comparison of children’s purity and the adults’ social adaptation aimed at the earthly grandeur underlines the essential conceptual antithesis of Mussorgsky’s tragedy. Forceful power of the tsar’s reign (the choral “*Glory*” with the ceremonial pealing of bells in the coronation scene) is opposed by the Divine glory with its softly radiating light (“*Glory to You, the Almighty Creator on earth*”). The composer outlined one more essentially important role of the children’s factor in this case by accentuating the most mollifying moment in the boys’ choir of blind pilgrims’ guides through the children’s voices —trebles and altos (coda; *ppp*, the scale *As-dur* descending from *as*<sup>2</sup> to *as*<sup>1</sup>)<sup>34</sup>.

The theme of childhood is closely related with the portrayal of the *Simpleton*, drawn in strikingly bright colors and also enlarged by Mussorgsky by adding his own text to the one by Pushkin<sup>35</sup>. The Simpleton is defenseless, being oblivious to evil and showing no feeling of insecurity since he is open to God. His “absolute trust turns into the tragedy of trustfulness.”<sup>36</sup> He looks not at the boys, but into the depths of a human life, the fates of people, his country and the world at large. His outlook is directed at something invisible but very important. Moreover, he is making prophecies. And this spiritual height and the power of prophecy are directly linked with infantile qualities of his soul.

The incoherent text of his song “*The moon is moving, the pussycat is crying*” is supported by the intonations of weeping as sincere as those of Mishenka, the hero of *The Nursery* (“*In the Corner*”). The glide of tonics (*a, C, c, Des, Ges, F, f, Fes, Es, es, Des, D*→*a*) and the fluctuation of natural degrees inscribed into the context of new modality create the sensation

<sup>33</sup> Golovinsky, G., Sabinina, M. Ibid. pp. 364-365.

<sup>34</sup> We should point out that in his edition of *Boris Godunov* Rimsky-Korsakov has underscored this antithesis. By cutting off the end of Scene 1 in the Prologue (a scene of the people with the Constable), he thereby caused a direct clash between the chorus of the blind pilgrims’ guides and the coronation pealing of bells.

<sup>35</sup> The quatrains “*For God’s sake, bow to Jesus Christ*”, and then, in the finale of the scene before St. Basil’s Cathedral or in the opera’s coda “*Pour out bitter tears*”.

<sup>36</sup> Stasov, V.V. Perov and Mussorgsky//Articles on Music. Issue 3. Moscow: 1977. p. 130.

of “drifting consciousness”. At the same time, transparency of the texture, a bright high register, an almost child’s timbre of voice (lyric tenor) make one think about some unearthly beauty bringing the Simpleton nearer to the world of childhood. The unsteady ending of the song is particularly impressive: consciousness appears to refuse working — to think and reflect; there arises the feeling of confusion and dissolution in some different, spiritual reality. Such immersion in one’s own world inaccessible to anyone else often arises in a little child as well.

Another common feature of children and holy fools is the metric and rhythmic structure of their poetic diction (which sometimes seems nonsensical or ridiculous). To quote Elena E. Durandina, “The speech of holy fools in Russia had its token symbols. Mussorgsky appears to follow them accurately in his own text”<sup>37</sup>. Then the scholar refers to Dmitry S. Likhachev’s statement: “Most likely, the principle of silence developed into glossolalia, i.e., incoherent mumbling, comprehensible only to a holy fool (‘the words are dulled’). This mumbling (texts of the holy fool – *Е.Д.*) is akin to the children’s language”<sup>38</sup>.

Similarly to the accentuation of the dramaturgical contrast between the murdered tsarevich and the tsar the killer, the Simpleton’s image is also inscribed into one of the opera’s most vital antitheses. The point is in a spiritual contest between the invested with power tsar and the most humiliated, according to the earthly criteria, idiot Nikolka, who could be easily deceived even by little boys, and certainly these normal (in ordinary notions) boys far surpass him according to the same worldly table of ranks. In this respect the Simpleton is like a child; for he can be offended and scorned by anyone realizing that he wouldn’t kick back.

Yet, as is known, a moral and spiritual victory is indeed won by this childishly ingenuous character not belonging to this world. He proves to be the only one who dares to defy the tsar, moreover, he does so in public by uttering the condemning truth: “*you have killed the little tsarevich.*” This moment marked by tragic idioms (the apprehensive motion in semiquavers, passacaglia-like chromatic basso) is at the same time distinguished by purity, childish simplicity of sounds, and a close affinity with the children’s characteristics (in particular, with Dimitri’s motto theme; diatonics, the simplicity of melodic progressions in the vocal part, and modality in the upper layer of musical texture)<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> Durandina, E. *Mussorgsky’s Song-Cycles*. Moscow: 1985. p. 98. In the context of the holy fools’ rhythmical speech, the scholar refers to the text of Mussorgsky’s song “Darling Savishna” which, in her view, is “most remarkable for its clearly discernible rhythm” elucidating, among other things, the seemingly incomprehensible association of “Savishna” with “Ivanovna” and the like.

<sup>38</sup> Likhachev, D., Panchenko, A. “The Comic World” of Old Russia. Leningrad: 1976. p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> According to the principle of a “tonal script” which took the final shape in Mussorgsky’s song-cycle *The Nursery*, the Simpleton’s last words are conspicuous precisely due to the lack of any accent placed on them. Though uttered calmly, as if inter alia, in complete silence (alternation of eighths, triplets of semiquavers and even semiquavers), it is

In the tragedy of Pushkin and Mussorgsky the Simpleton personifies conscience, Christian mildness and acquiescence. Like children pure at heart, he is forever open to the supreme truth, which grants him the gift of prophesizing. In contrast to tsarevich Fyodor who in his plays and pastime unwittingly predicts the tragic future, the Simpleton strikes by his clairvoyance extending over the many years to come in the distant future.

Here also the importance of the children's factor is underlined by Mussorgsky through the sounds of the nursery song "The moon is moving" in order to reveal the "unearthly" message of his wise revelation: *"Pour out bitter tears, bewail, the orthodox soul. The enemy is soon to come, bringing in impenetrable darkness. Woe and sorrow always, lament, Russian folk, poor hungry folk!"* Such is the finale of the opera *Boris Godunov*...

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Therefore, the theme of childhood is one of the most essential constituents in the conception of the opera *Boris Godunov*. The inclusion of children's images associated primarily with innocence highlights the fundamental antithesis between the spiritual and the spiritually deprived, the heavenly and the worldly, the purifying supreme truth and the mean egotistical passions killing one's soul and driving man to crimes. Manifested extensionally at all the semantic and dramaturgical levels, it reveals the principal orientation of the composer's art towards delineating a perennial conflict between the opposite spiritual essences and a hope for the ultimate victory of the Heavenly over the earthly.

The children's factor turns here into a criterion of righteousness and, consequently, of the spiritual moral principle understood as the evangelical gospel truth: *"Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"* (St. Matthew, 18: 3). This approach reflects the perception of a problem, which has become part and parcel of the entire Christian civilization and culture as evidenced by ample examples in literature, painting and music irrespective of their author being a Christian or not.

Guided by this criterion Mussorgsky shows that Boris's sincere, sacred love for his children, which can be viewed as the children's factor, saves the criminal tsar, and that the children's aspect (in kids and adults alike) open to the truth and viewing life at its unearthly, heavenly angle is capable of making prophecies. At the same time, the worldly evil destroys the child's purity, makes him aggressive, spoils his soul and actually deprives of childhood. In his analytic approach

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impossible not to lend an attentive ear to these words: *"You cannot pray for Tsar Herod!!! The Mother of God disallows it"*.



of a true psychologist the composer associates children's cruelty with its horrible consequences, in particular, with the growth of mean instincts uniting a wild mob in its lust for blood.

Hence, the present analysis allows us to grasp the systemic method in depicting the children's images in the composer's conception, a fundamental importance of the childhood line and its correlations with the opera's other dramaturgical lines, as well as to disclose new facets in the content of *Boris Godunov* and look at the well known ones from an unexpected point of view.