

MUSSORGSKY *Boris Godunov* • Emil Cooper, cond; Ezio Pinza (*Boris*); Risë Stevens (*Marina*); Richard Tucker (*Grigory/Dimitry*); Alessio De Paolis (Prince Shuisky); Anthony Marlowe (Simpleton); Francesco Valentino (Rangoni); Nicola Moscona (*Pimen*); Salvatore Baccaloni (*Varlaam*); Metropolitan Opera Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1179-3, mono (3 CDs 221:15) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 12/7/1946
& **EZIO PINZA SINGS BORIS ARIAS IN RUSSIAN** *Coronation Scene* and *Boris's Death*. **RICHARD TUCKER SAN FRANCISCO INTERVIEW, JUNE 19, 1970** Excerpts from Verdi: *Aida* and *Rigoletto* and Ponchielli: *La Gioconda* (with Risë Stevens)

By **Ken Meltzer**
FANFARE March / April 2023

Immortal Performances (IP) presents a December 7, 1946 Metropolitan Opera Saturday broadcast performance of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, with spoken commentary by host Milton Cross. The title role is sung by the Italian basso Ezio Pinza. The performance is reproduced in good sound, perhaps a little below the quality of contemporaneous studio recordings, but still providing ample definition and color. The broadcast is far more a representative document of the featured artists than it is of Mussorgsky's opera. The performance employs the Rimsky-Korsakov version, with the final act reconfigured so that the opera ends with Boris's death. In addition, *Boris Godunov* is performed in an Italian translation of the Russian libretto. Nonetheless, the broadcast has much to offer. First and foremost is Pinza's interpretation of Boris. At the time of the performance, Pinza was 54, and had been singing professionally at the Met for more than 20 years. In this broadcast, Pinza remains in sterling voice; and what a voice it is. A true *basso cantante*, Pinza sings with arresting tonal beauty and elegance. Although Pinza didn't read music, he was most assuredly an intensely musical singer. And when needed, his voice has the requisite power and commanding upper register. Pinza was also a mesmerizing actor, both visually and vocally. And he is superb as Boris. Pinza brilliantly portrays Boris's overwhelming sense of guilt, without ever lapsing into excess or caricature. Paternal roles often brought out the best in Pinza (Fiesco in Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* and Lothario in Thomas's *Mignon* come to mind). Pinza is infinitely tender and loving in the various scenes involving Boris and his children. Boris was very close to Pinza's heart, and this 1946 broadcast is a fine representation of his achievements in the role.

Although the opera is entitled *Boris Godunov*, the title character is on stage for a relatively brief totality. The need for first-rate supporting artists is therefore at a premium. On this occasion, the Met does itself proud. Three young Met artists who would go on to become beloved mainstays of the company here make their broadcast role debuts. Tenor Richard Tucker, at the outset of his long and storied Met career, is a first-rate Grigory/Dimitry. Tucker's employs his vibrant and attractive lirico-spinto with a winning synthesis of artistry, passion, and vigor. In subsequent years, Tucker would adopt some mannerisms (over-emphatic declamation, intentional sharpening at the conclusion of climactic high notes) that

bothered some critics and fans (I don't count myself among them). Here, Tucker is free of those affects, in a sterling performance that I think will please even those who don't gravitate to his later work. Mezzo Risë Stevens, also in rich, secure voice, is convincing as the seductive Marina. The confrontation between Dimitry and Marina, sizzling with tension, is a harbinger of the many times Tucker and Stevens would square off in Bizet's *Carmen*. Robert Merrill appears in the brief role of Shchelkalov, and the baritone's glorious, lyric voice is immediately recognizable.

Bass Nicola Moscona sings with great beauty and authority as Pimen. His meeting with Boris in the opera's closing scene (as staged by the Met) crackles with tension. Salvatore Baccaloni, the Met's beloved venerable *basso buffo*, performs Varlaam with gusto, an appropriately earthy quality, but with a rich voice and keen musicality as well. Baritone Francesco Valentino, not in his finest and most secure voice, is nonetheless a potent force as Rangoni. The brilliant character tenor Alessio De Paolis is a marvelous Prince Shuisky. De Paolis, in excellent voice, employs his genius in deployment of diction and world coloring to create an unforgettable portrait of the scheming Prince. Another character tenor, Anthony Marlowe, is effective in his brief but important role as The Simpleton. Conductor Emil Cooper, who had a distinguished career in his native Russia before emigrating to the US, leads a propulsive and taught performance, rich in vocal and instrumental color. All told, this is a performance that, while hardly an idiomatic realization of Mussorgsky's score, offers considerable drama and pleasure. Pinza's contribution alone makes it worth investigating. The listening experienced is enhanced by IP's written materials, including Dewey Faulkner's insightful commentary, a full plot synopsis, Richard Caniell's recording notes, and artist photos and bios.

I always look forward to IP's bonus material, a regular feature of their releases. The selections are invariably complementary to the principal offering, entertaining, and musically illuminating. That is once again the case in this set. First are two excerpts from the 1953 20th Century Fox movie *Tonight We Sing*. In that movie, a biopic of impresario Sol Hurok, Pinza is cast as the legendary Russian basso Feodor Chaliapin. Pinza is afforded several opportunities to sing and act classic Chaliapin (and Pinza) roles, including Boris, here sung in the original Russian. IP includes Pinza's renditions of the *Coronation Scene* and *Boris's Death* from the film. Pinza, in his early 60s, is still in excellent voice. I am in no position to grade Pinza's Russian diction, but he sings elegantly, and with great feeling. The recorded sound is excellent.

The bonus materials conclude with a June 19, 1970 San Francisco interview with Richard Tucker. During the interview, traffic sounds may be heard from outside, including the bells of SF's iconic cable cars. Tucker is forthcoming on a variety of subjects, including his own career, the risks of attempting dramatic repertoire too soon, stage directors who try to impose their will on the featured opera and its singers, etc. Tucker is refreshingly down to earth, witty, and very much the New Yorker (as someone whose father was born and raised in Brooklyn, Tucker's accent resonates strongly with me). The conversation with Tucker is illustrated by three musical excerpts. First is "Celeste Aida," from the

March 26, 1949 NBC telecast of Verdi's *Aida*. The conductor is the legendary Maestro Arturo Toscanini, who, at the age of 19, made a last-minute and unexpected conducting debut in a Buenos Aires performance of the opera. One can imagine the pressure on Richard Tucker, 35 and at the outset of his professional opera career at the time of the 1949 telecast. Tucker nonetheless sings with striking confidence, beauty, and heroism. At the conclusion of the aria, with the words "Vicino al sol," Tucker sings the expected high B-flat full voice, but then drops an octave to repeat, *pianissimo*, the phrase. In the SF interview, Tucker explains how this alternative ending was created by Verdi for a tenor who was petrified of singing the music as written (which, by the way, is marked *pianissimo* and *morendo*). Tucker adds that Verdi passed on his alternative conclusion to Toscanini, who in turn, shared it with Tucker. A full-throated rendition of the Duke of Mantua's aria "Parmi veder le lagrime", taken (I assume) from a 1956 Met performance follows. The last excerpt is an extended sequence from Act II of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, beginning with Enzo's great aria "Cielo e mar!" A considerable portion of the ensuing duet with Laura (Risë Stevens) follows. The performance is from a Met broadcast of March 16, 1946. Tucker made his successful Met debut the previous year (January 25, 1945) as Enzo. Here, he is in excellent, youthful voice.

All told, this set is a fine memorial to a host of beloved Met artists, led by Ezio Pinza. Warmly recommended.

Five stars: Ezio Pinza stars in an Italian-language Met *Boris Godunov*

Review by Henry Fogel
FAFARE March / April 2023

In his recording notes, producer Richard Caniell makes clear the reason for the sonic problems of this 1946 Met broadcast of *Boris Godunov*. "Unfortunately, the recording was privately made on acetate discs off-the-air. ABC was not preserving their air checks, and they did not make line checks during the 1940s." The result is sound quality more constricted and compressed than most broadcasts preserved from that era. However, this is a performance I would not want to have missed. Ezio Pinza was unquestionably one of the great singers of the 20th century.

Note that I didn't restrict my comment to basses or even male singers. Most lists of the finest dozen opera singers of the century would likely include Pinza. The role of Boris is central to basses, as it was to Pinza's career. I hope that Immortal Performances, or someone, will ultimately release the 1943 Pinza broadcast of this role, which is conducted by George Szell. There is also a 1939 Met broadcast with Pinza and a different cast conducted by Ettore Panizza, also not in great recoded sound.

The 1946–47 Met season represented Pinza's final appearances in Mussorgsky's opera, though he continued to sing at the Met until May 1948. It was the Met's tradition to present *Boris Godunov* in Italian as far back as 1913

when it was introduced to New York. Fyodor Chaliapin came to the Met in the 1921–22 season and sang in Russian, of course, but the rest of the cast sang in Italian. Pinza actually sang the role of Pimen in 1927 with Chaliapin as Boris. He studied Chaliapin's performance and wanted to sing the role in Russian but the Met's general manager, Edward Johnson, wouldn't permit it.

Despite the Italian language and the constricted sound (to which the ear adjusts as one listens), Pinza's monumental performance is remarkable for its vocal richness and dramatic force. He was a great vocal actor as well as a fine instinctive musician. Surprisingly, Pinza never learned to read music, and yet he learned roles in over 70 operas and was favored by some of the toughest and most important conductors of his day (Toscanini and Walter, for instance). Here his imposing sound and dramatic presence are apparent from Boris's first entrance in the Coronation Scene.

Certainly some elements of the Russian atmosphere in Mussorgsky's music are compromised by the Italian language. But perhaps because he had studied Chaliapin's portrayal, and because he has the Ukrainian conductor Emil Cooper in the pit, Pinza sounds far more idiomatic than one might expect. His voice is solid from top to bottom, with a compact core surrounded by rich overtones, and he colors it with imagination and dramatic force.

The rest of the cast is a demonstration of what the Met at its best could assemble. You will never encounter another Grigory with the vocal splendor of the young Richard Tucker, although Tucker might have toned himself down in the duet with Marina, sung beautifully by Risë Stevens. Nicola Moscona is ideal as Pimen, with steady tone and an appropriate calmness of demeanor for the reclusive monk. Salvatore Baccaloni, mostly known for his *buffo* roles, offers up a richly vocalized Varlaam. Alessio de Paolis is wonderfully oily as Shuisky.

The bonus material on this release is also superb. Pinza's singing of Boris's scenes in Russian (he portrayed Chaliapin in the film *Tonight We Sing*) sounds surprisingly comfortable and idiomatic. The film was made in 1953, and Pinza shows remarkably little deterioration of voice despite having been singing since 1914. The Richard Tucker material also serves to remind us just how good he was, in an era when he may have been taken for granted because his rivals were Bjoerling, Bergonzi, del Monaco, di Stefano, and Corelli!

Dewey Faulkner's booklet essays about the performance and the opera are, as usual, informative and absorbing. A detailed synopsis, Caniell's recording notes, artist bios, and some lovely historical photos round out the impressive booklet.