



Ferruccio Furlanetto as Boris; Photo by Ken Howard

San Diego Opera's season opener 'Boris Godunov' was good, but the audience wanted more.

**MODEST MUSSORGSKY
BORIS GODUNOV
SAN DIEGO OPERA
JANUARY 27, 2007**

By: Carol Jean Delmar

The San Diego Opera season began with a bang on Saturday, Jan. 27. But during the intermission, at least one patron said that she wondered why "Boris Godunov" was selected as the opening opera.

The patron probably didn't realize that the reason for the choice was Ferruccio Furlanetto, the great Italian bass who has graced the stage of the San Diego Civic Theatre since 1985 in such roles as Mozart's Don Giovanni, Gounod's Méphistophélès, Verdi's King Philip II and Rossini's Don Basilio. Furlanetto was the first Italian to sing Boris at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia, and has also sung the part in Rome, at the Maggio Musicale in Florence and at La Scala. He is set to sing Boris at the Wiener Staatsoper in May and June. His Boris in San Diego marks the first time he has sung the role in the United States.

But there is one major difference between the "Boris Godunov" that is being staged in San Diego and the "Boris" which will be performed in Vienna in May. Modest Mussorgsky originally composed a seven-scene opera based on Alexander Pushkin's historical drama and works by Nikolay Karamzin, which was rejected by the Mariinsky Theatre. He then altered it and added a female love interest to spice things up; and later, other composers had their way with the score, including Rimsky-Korsakov and Shostakovich.

The San Diego Opera production is the original seven-scene version composed in 1869. The longer more elaborately-orchestrated version will be produced in Vienna.

Boris is a plumb role for a bass who is capable of both singing and acting dramatically. After Ivan the Terrible died in 1584, his son, Dimitri, became heir to the throne, but Dimitri supposedly killed himself while playing with a sword. Boris was then proclaimed czar even though many believed that he was responsible for Dimitri's death, and the opera is based on that rumor.

Czar Boris remains relatively stable until a novice, Grigori, pretends to be the grown-up Dimitri. Doubting that the czarevitch was ever murdered, Boris goes mad, has hallucinatory fits and dies.

Now what could be more delectable for an actor-singer than a mad scene? Feodor Chaliapin, who sang the longer Rimsky-Korsakov version, made the role of Boris famous not so much for his voice, but more for his melodramatic portrayal.

In 1972 and '89, San Diego Opera staged the longer version. The shorter original is a first for the company.

The scenery, which was owned by the Canadian Opera Company, was purchased by and redesigned by Seattle Opera. Although a bit tired-looking, it appeared adequate for the San Diego opening. The iconic gold-lamé backdrop was very effective. But when a dull-looking house curtain kept dropping down in between scenes, the rolling ruckus behind it was somewhat tiresome to the ear. Some modernization might be in order. A revolving stage? The options are limitless.

The lighting was very commendable, especially during the coronation scene as the new czar and others progressed down a ramp which was accented with illumination. The costumes and wigs were historically authentic and colorful, including long robes and beards for the boyars, folk costumes for the townspeople and a heavy red and gold-brocade robe adorned with pearls for the czar.

Although Boris's costume in Scene 5 was historically authentic with breeches and boots, something more elaborate might have been more effective in complementing the character's visions and strife – something that would have made him appear less youthful and larger than life.

I can't imagine anyone more appropriate for the role of Boris than Ferruccio Furlanetto. His voice is at once mellow with a singular timbre that warms the soul. He has the ability to move mountains with his powerful voice and emotions, and his stage movement is precise and accomplished. When his Boris rolled off the throne to his death in Scene 7, I held my breath. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the opera, the audience seemed reluctant to rise. Maybe they needed to see more of Boris onstage to develop an attachment to the character whose most memorable moments were after intermission. Maybe Furlanetto's characterization should have been even broader with more stage action downstage. I assume he was following the director's lead because I know him to be a consummate actor capable of reaching soulful emotional depths. His performance

was a tour de force. I would like to see it again in another place and time.

“Boris Godunov” is not just about Boris, though. It is about the Russian people, many struggling to find food and stay alive. The chorus, under the direction of Timothy Todd Simmons, was wonderful. Even the children sang in Russian. Also noteworthy were Vitalij Kowaljow as Pimen and Mikhail Svetlov as the drunken friar, Varlaam. Both basses had rich, melodious voices and the ability to communicate their stories. Innkeeper Judith Christin added some delightful comic relief with her duck song and prop. Inna Dukach was an impressive Xenia; Jay Hunter Morris’s voice was at times pinched as Grigori; Allan Glassman was a conniving Prince Shuisky; and Joseph Frank as Missail, Lisa Agazzi as Feodor, Doug Jones as the Simpleton, and Martha Jane Howe as the nurse, rounded off a polished cast.

Lotfi Mansouri directed this “Boris” with flair although I would really like to ask him about his concept for Boris. The performers, including the choristers and supernumeraries, were in character at all times, responding to their environment with actions that were appropriate even when they weren’t in the limelight. As for Shuisky’s move to the throne – now that was creativity.

Valéry Ryvkin conducted the musicians somewhat metronomically. More lyricism could have been drawn out of this most capable orchestra, which at times overpowered some of the singers. The chiming of the bells, which was generated backstage through speakers around the auditorium, failed to communicate the wonderful resonant sounds of historical Russia.

In conclusion, San Diego Opera’s “Boris Godunov” is a smooth, well-rehearsed production with fine singing and acting, but it just didn’t seem to grab the audience. Russian opera isn’t performed as frequently as bel canto, French and German opera. Listening to the language and music is an acquired taste. The more you hear the beauty of it, the more it grows on you. Maybe this audience simply needs more exposure.

Conductor, Valéry Ryvkin
Director, Lotfi Mansouri
Scenic Designers, Robert Dahlstrom, Wolfram Skalicki
Lighting Designer, Todd Hensley
Chorus Master, Timothy Todd Simmons
Costumes, Malabar Ltd. in Toronto
Wig & Makeup Designer, Steven W. Bryant
Diction Coach, Valentina Schukin