

MUSSORGSKY *Boris Godunov* — George Szell, cond; Alexander Kipnis (*Boris Godunov*); Marita Farell (*Xenia*); Kerstin Thorborg (*Marina*); Irra Petina (*Feodor*); Anna Kaskas (*Nurse*); Doris Doe (*Innkeeper*); René Maison (*Grigory*); Alessio de Paolis (*Shuisky*); John Dudley (*Missail*); John Garris (*Simpleton*); Leonard Warren (*Rangoni*); Nicolo Moscona (*Pimen*); Norman Cordon (*Varlaam*); George Cehanovsky (*Shchelkalov*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O — IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1124-3 mono (3 CDs: 228:56) Live: New York 2/13/1943

& **MUSSORGSKY *Boris Godunov*** (orch. Shostakovich): Act II Monologue; Act II Clock Scene; Act IV Death of Boris (Alexander Kipnis (*Boris*); Fritz Reiner, cond; NYP SO, 7/23/1944). **GOUNOD *Faust***: Act I: *Mais ce Dieu! A moi les plaisirs*. Act III: *Que le Dieu; Si le ciel*. Act IV: Introduction; *Seigneur daignez; Vous qui faites*. Act V: *Alerte! Alerte!* (Marita Farell (*Marguerite*); Martha Lipton (*Marthe*); Ernest McChesney (*Faust*); Alexander Kipnis (*Méphistophélès*); Joseph Stopak, cond; unidentified O, 6/5/1943)

& Alexander Kipnis Reminisces About His Career

Review by Henry Fogel

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No one would recommend this release as the only recording of Mussorgsky's operatic masterpiece in a collection. The performance uses the old Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration, and there are debatable choices made for inclusion or exclusion of certain scenes. As a final obstacle, the entire cast, except for the title character, sings the opera in Italian (the Met performed it for years in Italian with Ezio Pinza as Boris).

That said, for anyone who loves the opera, this historic recording from a 1943 radio broadcast is essential. It has been released previously on a few different labels, but there is no comparison between those efforts and Richard Caniell's superb restoration here. Caniell combined two sources, relying mostly on the ABC broadcast over the Met's network, but replacing damaged portions with the South American Spanish-language broadcast, which was always made separately. The sound overall is significantly more vivid and less compressed than any prior version that I have heard.

The legendary Ukrainian bass Alexander Kipnis wanted to sing Boris at the Met when he joined the company in 1940, but he was employed for his first few seasons mainly in Wagnerian repertoire. In 1943 he was finally

given the opportunity, and the Met surrounded him with a superb cast, entrusting the conducting to George Szell.

Only those who see life as a zero-sum game will engage in the argument about who was better in the role, Kipnis or Pinza. Both were great and unique artists. Pinza's Boris from 1938 at the Met is available on a dimmer-sounding Naxos transfer (dimmer because of the quality of the source, not because of any flaw in Naxos's transfer). But the thrill of Kipnis's performance is very special, in part because he was singing in his native language with the kind of comprehension of the text that can only come from knowing the meaning of every word. In addition, Kipnis's dark, richly colored voice is married to an artist who knows how to use those colors. The panic felt by Boris in the Clock Scene is conveyed with masterful psychological intensity, for example. By the time he opera reaches Boris's prayer, "Gospodi," the voice is drained of color just as the Czar is drained of hope.

Kipnis creates his character more through such means of vocal coloring and dynamic shading than Pinza, who displays a wider range of inflection and dramatic emphasis. Both men have voices of remarkable beauty and richness, and both have keen dramatic instincts. In many places where singers in this role have just only poured out a big, black sound, Kipnis will drain the color out of his tone for dramatic purposes. This makes the big moments when he does let it all out much more powerful. We would be poorer if we did not have both Kipnis and Pinza's Boris.

There are many other aspects of this performance worthy of preservation. First among them is George Szell's conducting. Szell was a taskmaster, and he gets exquisite playing out of the orchestra (and fine singing from the all-important chorus). While at his worst Szell could be dry, colorless, and unexciting, that is not the case here. He is sensitive to the drama at all points, and he brings out the richness of Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration, which is generally condemned today but which in fact kept this opera alive for the better part of a century. Szell's crisp rhythms never break up the line of the music, and he demonstrates a flexibility in accompanying Kipnis that we might not have expected.

Virtually every significant role is taken by a singer of importance. Nicola Moscona's firm, richly vocalized Pimen is particularly noteworthy, and Leonard Warren's brilliant Rangoni makes one regret that this production reduced the role with some cuts. Kerstin Thorborg's beautifully sung and sharply characterized Marini is another bonus. In the scene between Marina and Rangoni, have we ever had the luxury of two voices

as plush and powerful as Thorborg and Warren? Even Norman Cordon's Varlaam is well sung and not hammed up. René Maison's Dimitry is oily and strongly enacted, and John Garris serves very well as the Simpleton, avoiding the exaggerated gestures we often get in that role. Alessio de Paolis is a perfect Shuisky too.

Immortal Performances frequently offers some valuable extras with its releases, and this time is no exception. First we have a broadcast of the world premiere of Dmitri Shostakovich's orchestration of *Boris Godunov*, or more specifically three big scenes: the second act monologue, the Clock Scene, and Boris's Farewell. These derive from a New York Philharmonic concert on July 23, 1944 with Fritz Reiner conducting. The same positive attributes from Kipnis that we heard in the complete performance apply here, although to my ears to a slightly lower degree of heat. The voice remains strong and imposing, but it is no surprise that a fully staged production might bring out more intensity in characterization than in a concert setting. Still, it is very instructive to hear Mussorgsky's original version played and shaped as well as it is here by Reiner, and the beauty of Kipnis's singing is treasurable.

Rounding out the musical portion of the set, we get excerpts from Gounod's *Faust* from a WJZ broadcast that have never been issued before. Kipnis never sang Méphistophélès at the Met; the role belonged to Pinza, which is certainly understandable. However, it would be ideal if opera impresarios saw their responsibility to make available a full range of the possibilities at any given moment in history. The blackness of Kipnis's voice is perfect for the role, and his very strong (some will say excessive) characterization reminds us that one of the great interpreters of this role historically was another Russian, the outsized figure of Fyodor Chaliapin. There is no indication, other than the words "WJZ Broadcast," of the origin of the performance. Was it meant for radio only? Did it take place on some stage? In any case, these excerpts afford a great opportunity to hear Kipnis in a major bass role. The rock-solid core of his voice makes for an extremely impressive Devil.

The excerpts are curiously chosen (the Garden scene suddenly stops after Mephistopheles's invocation of night, and the Calf of Gold aria is missing), and Kipnis stands out as the one performer who leaves an impression. Tenor Ernest McChesney and soprano Marita Farell sing well enough as Faust and Marguerite, but both are vocalizing without any connection to the drama. In her brief appearance Martha Lipton's Marthe is a bit stronger. Finally, the conducting of Joseph Stopak lacks any dramatic

pointing or intensity. Despite all of those negatives, this grouping is a major addition to our knowledge of Kipnis.

One of the most knowledgeable and articulate critics of singing was John Steane (1928–2011). In his indispensable book, *The Grand Tradition*, he devotes almost three full pages to Kipnis. Steane's opening line says it all: "Kipnis was a miracle among singers." About the specific performance of *Boris Godunov* in this set, Steane says, "This is powerfully voiced, with some exquisite moments of *pianissimo* singing. The excellence of *legato* makes acceptable and doubly effective the freely pitched declamation.... Kipnis *sounds* like an Eisenstein film, and something very dramatic, and very Russian, is gained."

The final bonus is what sounds like it might have been Kipnis's answers to an interviewer's questions about his life and career. It is a quite engrossing and valuable addition.

As is the norm for Immortal Performances, the accompanying booklet is a major asset to the set. A deeply knowledgeable and well-written essay on the singer by William Russell is joined by helpful recording notes from Caniell, terrific photographs, and complete documentation regarding all the performances. The radio commentary by Milton Cross and the New York Philharmonic announcer is included but tracked separately so you can skip it.

Many reviewers and collectors, probably including me, use the word "historic" too loosely. This set, however, deserves that adjective, as it makes available in far better sound quality than has been the case, a powerful performance of *Boris Godunov* with an unforgettable protagonist.

Five Stars: An historic and thrilling *Boris Godunov*