OPERAS FOR SEPTEMBER 2026

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Stories of the Operas

Il Turco in Italia

Il turco in Italia (The Turk in Italy) is an opera in two acts by Gioachino Rossini. The Italian-language libretto was written by Felice Romani. It was a re-working of a libretto by Caterino Mazzolà set as an opera (with the same title) by the German composer Franz Seydelmann in 1788.

Characters

Don Geronio, a Neapolitan gentleman	Massimiliano Gagliardo, bass
Fiorilla, his wife	Myrto Papatanasiu, mezzo-soprano
Selim, the Turk	Natale de Carolis,bass
Narciso, in love with Fiorilla	Amadeo Moretti, tenor
Prosdocimo, a poet	Piero Guarnera, baritone
Zaida, a Turk	Damiana Pinti, mezzo-soprano
Albazar, a Turk	Daniele Zanfardino, tenor

With Chorus & Orchestra of the Marrucino Theatre of Chieti conducted by Marzio Conti

Synopsis

Time: 18th Century

Place: In and around Naples

Act 1: By the sea shore near Naples. The poet Prosdocimo (baritone) is searching for a plot for a drama buffo. He meets a band of Gypsies, including the beautiful but unhappy Zaida (mezzo-soprano) and her confidant Albazar (tenor). Perhaps the Gypsies can provide some ideas? Prosdocimo's friend, the obstinate and sometimes foolish Geronio (bass), is looking for a fortune teller to advise him on his marital problems, but the Gypsies tease him. Zaida tells Prosdocimo that she is from a Turkish harem. She and her master, Prince Selim, were in love, but jealous rivals accused her of infidelity and she had to flee for her life, accompanied by Albazar. Nevertheless, she still loves only one man and that man is Selim. Prosdocimo knows that a Turkish prince will shortly be arriving in Italy. Perhaps he can help? Geronio's capricious young wife Fiorilla (soprano) enters singing (in contrast to Zaida) of the joys of free and unfettered love. A Turkish ship arrives and the prince disembarks. It is Selim (bass) himself. Fiorilla is immediately attracted to the handsome Turk, and a romance rapidly develops. Narciso (tenor) appears in her pursuit. He is an ineffectual admirer of Fiorilla posing as a friend of her husband. Geronio follows, horrified to learn that Fiorilla is taking the Turk home to drink his coffee!

Geronio's house: Fiorilla and Selim are flirting. Geronio enters timidly and Selim is initially impressed by his unexpected meekness, however Narciso noisily scolds Geronio. The domestic ménage irritates Selim and he leaves after quietly arranging to meet Fiorilla again

by his ship. Geronio tells Fiorilla he will not allow any more Turks - or Italians - in his house. She sweetly undermines his complaints, and then, when he softens, threatens to punish him by enjoying herself even more wildly.

The sea shore at night: Selim is waiting for Fiorilla. Instead he meets Zaida. The former lovers are shocked and delighted, and declare once more their mutual love. Narciso re-appears, followed by Fiorilla in disguise, with Geronio in pursuit. Selim confuses the veiled Fiorilla with Zaida and the two women come suddenly face to face. Fiorilla accuses Selim of betrayal. Zaida confronts Fiorilla. Geronio tells his wife to go home. There is a stormy finale.

Act 2: At an inn. Selim approaches Geronio amicably, offering to buy Fiorilla. That way Geronio can be rid of his problems and also make some money. Geronio refuses. Selim vows to steal her instead. After they leave, Fiorilla and a group of her friends appear, followed by Zaida. Fiorilla has set up a meeting between them and Selim, so that the Turk will be forced to decide between the two women. In the event he is indecisive, not wishing to lose either of them. Zaida leaves in disgust. Selim and Fiorilla quarrel but are eventually reconciled. As the poet tells Geronio, there is going to be a party. Fiorilla will be there to meet Selim, who will be masked. Geronio should also go - disguised as a Turk! Narciso overhears this, and decides to take advantage of the situation to take Fiorilla himself, in revenge for her former indifference. Geronio laments his destiny, that he should have such a terrible, crazy wife. Albazar passes by holding a costume - for Zaida!

A ballroom with masqueraders and dancers: Fiorilla mistakes Narciso for Selim and Narciso leads her away. Meanwhile, Selim enters with Zaida, under the impression that she is Fiorilla. Geronio is in utter despair at finding two couples and two Fiorillas! Narciso and Selim both entreat their partners to leave with them. Confused and angry, Geronio attempts to stop both couples, but they eventually escape.

Back at the inn: Prosdocimo meets Geronio. They now know that Selim was with Zaida and guess that Fiorilla was with Narciso. Albazar confirms that Selim will definitely stay with Zaida. Prosdocimo advises Geronio to have his revenge on Fiorilla by pretending to divorce her and threatening to send her back to her family.

Having discovered Narciso's deception, Fiorilla tries to find Selim, but he has already left with Zaida. She returns home only to find the divorce letter, and her belongings being removed from the house. She is devastated by shame, and promptly deserted by her friends.

The beach: Selim and Zaida are about to set sail for Turkey, while Fiorilla is looking for a boat to take her back to her home town. Geronio finds and forgives her. They are affectionately reconciled. Both couples are now reunited and Prosdocimo is delighted with his happy ending.

Pelléas et Mélisande Debussy

Pelléas et Mélisande (Pelléas and Mélisande) is an opera in five acts with music by Claude Debussy. The French libretto was adapted from Maurice Maeterlinck's Symbolist play Pelléas et Mélisande. It premiered at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on 30 April 1902 with Jean Périer as Pelléas and Mary Garden as Mélisande in a performance conducted by André Messager, who was instrumental in getting the Opéra-Comique to stage the work. The only opera Debussy ever completed, it is considered a landmark in 20th-century music.

The plot concerns a love triangle. Prince Golaud finds Mélisande, a mysterious young woman, lost in a forest. He marries her and brings her back to the castle of his grandfather, King Arkel of Allemonde. Here Mélisande becomes increasingly attached to Golaud's younger half-brother Pelléas, arousing Golaud's jealousy. Golaud goes to excessive lengths to find out the truth about Pelléas and Mélisande's relationship, even forcing his own child, Yniold, to spy on the couple. Pelléas decides to leave the castle but arranges to meet Mélisande one last time and the two finally confess their love for one another. Golaud, who has been eavesdropping, rushes out and kills Pelléas. Mélisande dies shortly after, having given birth to a daughter, with Golaud still begging her to tell him "the truth".

Characters

Arkel, King of Allemonde	bass	Jean-Philippe Courtis
Geneviève, mother of Golaud and Pelléas	contralto	Christa Ludwig
Golaud, grandson of Arkel	bass-baritone	Jose Van Dam
Pelléas, grandson of Arkel	high baritone	Francois Le-Roux
Mélisande	soprano	Maria Ewing
Yniold, the young son of Golaud	soprano	Patrizia Pace
Doctor	bass	Rudolf Mazzola
Shepherd	baritone	Jean-Philippe Courtis

Vienna State Opera Chorus; Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Claudio AbbadoSynopsis

Act 1: Scene 1: A forest

Prince Golaud, grandson of King Arkel of Allemonde, has become lost while hunting in the forest. He discovers a frightened, weeping girl sitting by a spring in which a crown is visible. She reveals her name is Mélisande but nothing else about her origins and refuses to let Golaud retrieve her crown from the water. Golaud persuades her to come with him before the forest gets dark.

Scene 2: A room in the castle

Six months have passed. Geneviève, the mother of the princes Golaud and Pelléas, reads a letter to the aged and nearly blind King Arkel. It was sent by Golaud to his brother Pelléas. In it Golaud reveals that he has married Mélisande, although he knows no more about her than on the day they first met. Golaud fears that Arkel will be angry with him and tells Pelléas to find how he reacts to the news. If the old man is favourable then Pelléas should light a lamp from the tower facing the sea on the third day; if Golaud does not see the lamp shining, he will sail on and never return home. Arkel had planned to marry the widowed Golaud to Princess Ursule in order to put an end to "long wars and ancient hatreds", but he bows to fate and accepts Golaud's marriage to Mélisande. Pelléas enters, weeping. He has received a letter from his friend Marcellus, who is on his deathbed, and wants to travel to say goodbye to him. Arkel thinks Pelléas should wait for the return of Golaud, and also reminds Pelléas of his own father, lying sick in bed in the castle. Geneviève tells Pelléas not to forget to light the lamp for Golaud.

Scene 3: Before the castle

Geneviève and Mélisande walk in the castle grounds. Mélisande remarks how dark the surrounding gardens and forest are. Pelléas arrives. They look out to sea and notice a large ship departing and a lighthouse shining, Mélisande foretells that it will sink. Night falls.

Geneviève goes off to look after Yniold, Golaud's young son by his previous marriage. Pelléas attempts to take Melisande's hand to help her down the steep path but she refuses saying that she is holding flowers. He tells her he might have to go away tomorrow. Mélisande asks him why.

Act 2: Scene 1: A well in the park

It is a hot summer day. Pelléas has led Mélisande to one of his favourite spots, the "Blind Men's Well". People used to believe it possessed miraculous powers to cure blindness but since the old king's eyesight started to fail, they no longer come there. Mélisande lies down on the marble rim of the well and tries to see to the bottom. Her hair loosens and falls into the water. Pelléas notices how extraordinarily long it is. He remembers that Golaud first met Mélisande beside a spring and asks if he tried to kiss her at that time but she does not answer. Mélisande plays with the ring Golaud gave her, throwing it up into the air until it slips from her fingers into the well. Pelléas tells her not to be concerned but she is not reassured. He also notes that the clock was striking twelve as the ring dropped into the well. Mélisande asks him what she should tell Golaud. He replies, "the truth."

Scene 2: A room in the castle

Golaud is lying in bed with Mélisande at the bedside. He is wounded, having fallen from his horse while hunting. The horse suddenly bolted for no reason as the clock struck twelve. Mélisande bursts into tears and says she feels ill and unhappy in the castle. She wants to go away with Golaud. He asks her the reason for her unhappiness but she refuses to say. When he asks her if the problem is Pelléas, she replies that he is not the cause but she does not think he likes her. Golaud tells her not to worry: Pelléas can behave oddly and he is still very young. Mélisande complains about the gloominess of the castle, today was the first time she saw the sky. Golaud says that she is too old to be crying for such reasons and takes her hands to comfort her and notices the wedding ring is missing. Golaud becomes furious, Mélisande claims she dropped it in a cave by the sea where she went to collect shells with little Yniold. Golaud orders her to go and search for it at once before the tide comes in, even though night has fallen. When Mélisande replies that she is afraid to go alone, Golaud tells her to take Pelléas along with her.

Scene 3: Before a cave

Pelléas and Mélisande make their way down to the cave in pitch darkness. Mélisande is frightened to enter, but Pelléas tells her she will need to describe the place to Golaud to prove she has been there. The moon comes out lighting the cave and reveals three beggars sleeping in the cave. Pelléas explains there is a famine in the land. He decides they should come back another day.

Act 3: Scene 1: One of the towers of the castle

Mélisande is at the tower window, singing a song (Mes longs cheveux) as she combs her hair. Pelléas appears and asks her to lean out so he can kiss her hand as he is going away the next day. He cannot reach her hand but her long hair tumbles down from the window and he kisses and caresses it instead. Pelléas playfully ties Mélisande's hair to a willow tree in spite of her protests that someone might see them. A flock of doves takes flight. Mélisande panics when she hears Golaud's footsteps approaching. Golaud dismisses Pelléas and Mélisande as nothing but a pair of children and leads Pelléas away.

Scene 2: The vaults of the castle

Golaud leads Pelléas down to the castle vaults, which contain the dungeons and a stagnant pool which has "the scent of death." He tells Pelléas to lean over and look into the chasm while he holds him safely. Pelléas finds the atmosphere stifling and they leave.

Scene 3: A terrace at the entrance of the vaults

Pelléas is relieved to breathe fresh air again. It is noon. He sees Geneviève and Mélisande at a window in the tower. Golaud tells Pelléas that there must be no repeat of the "childish game" between him and Mélisande last night. Mélisande is pregnant and the least shock might disturb her health. It is not the first time he has noticed there might be something between Pelléas and Mélisande but Pelléas should avoid her as much as possible without making this look too obvious.

Scene 4: Before the castle

Golaud sits with his little son, Yniold, in the darkness before dawn and questions him about Pelléas and Mélisande. The boy reveals little that Golaud wants to know since he is too innocent to understand what he is asking. He says that Pelléas and Mélisande often quarrel about the door and that they have told Yniold he will one day be as big as his father. Golaud is puzzled when learning that they (Pelléas and Mélisande) never send Yniold away because they are afraid when he is not there and keep on crying in the dark. He admits that he once saw Pelléas and Mélisande kiss "when it was raining". Golaud lifts his son on his shoulders to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande through the window but Yniold says that they are doing nothing other than looking at the light. He threatens to scream unless Golaud lets him down again. Golaud leads him away.

Act 4: Scene 1: A room in the castle

Pelléas tells Mélisande that his father is getting better and has asked him to leave on his travels. He arranges a last meeting with Mélisande by the Blind Men's Well in the park.

Scene 2: The same

Arkel tells Mélisande how he felt sorry for her when she first came to the castle "with the strange, bewildered look of someone constantly awaiting a calamity." But now that is going to change and Mélisande will "open the door to a new era that I foresee." He asks her to kiss him. Golaud bursts in with blood on his forehead — he claims it was caused by a thorn hedge. When Mélisande tries to wipe the blood away, he angrily orders her not to touch him and demands his sword. He says that another peasant has died of starvation. Golaud notices Mélisande is trembling and tells her he is not going to kill her with the sword. He mocks the "great innocence" Arkel says he sees in Mélisande's eyes. He commands her to close them or "I will shut them for a long time." He tells Mélisande that she disgusts him and drags her around the room by her hair. When Golaud leaves, Arkel asks if he is drunk. Mélisande simply replies that he does not love her any more. Arkel comments: "If I were God, I would have pity on the hearts of men."

Scene 3: A well in the park

Yniold tries to lift a boulder to free his golden ball, which is trapped between it and some rocks. As darkness falls, he hears a flock of sheep suddenly stop bleating. A shepherd explains that they have turned onto a path that doesn't lead back to the sheepfold, but does not answer when Yniold asks where they will sleep. Yniold goes off to find someone to talk to.

Scene 4: The same

Pelléas arrives alone at the well. He is worried that he has become deeply involved with Mélisande and fears the consequences. He knows he must leave but first, he wants to see Mélisande one last time and tell her things he has kept to himself. Mélisande arrives. She was able to slip out without Golaud's noticing. At first she is distant but when Pelléas tells her he is going away she becomes more affectionate. After admitting his love for her, Mélisande confesses that she has loved him since she first saw him. Pelléas hears the servants shutting the castle gates for the night. Now they are locked out, but Mélisande says that it is for the better. Pelléas is resigned to fate too. After the two kiss, Mélisande hears something moving in the shadows. It is Golaud, who has been watching the couple from behind a tree. Golaud strikes down a defenseless Pelléas with his sword and kills him. Mélisande is also wounded but she flees into the woods saying to a dying Pelléas that she does not have courage.

Act 5: A bedroom in the castle

Mélisande sleeps in a sick bed after giving birth to her child. The doctor assures Golaud that despite her wound, her condition is not serious. Overcome with guilt, Golaud claims he has killed for no reason. Pelléas and Mélisande merely kissed "like a brother and sister." Mélisande wakes and asks for a window to be opened so she can see the sunset. Golaud asks the doctor and Arkel to leave the room so he can speak with Mélisande alone. He blames himself for everything and begs Melisande's forgiveness. Golaud presses Mélisande to confess her forbidden love for Pelléas. She maintains her innocence in spite of Golaud's increasingly desperate pleas to her to tell the truth. Arkel and the doctor return. Arkel tells Golaud to stop before he kills Mélisande, but he replies "I have already killed her." Arkel hands Mélisande her newborn baby girl but she is too weak to lift the child in her arms and remarks that the baby does not cry and that she will live a sad existence. The room fills with serving women, although no one can tell who has summoned them. Mélisande quietly dies. At the moment of death, the serving women fall to their knees. Arkel comforts the sobbing Golaud.

Dimitrij **Antonín Dvořák**

Grand opera in four acts, 1894-5 version,
Libretto by Marie Červinková-Riegrová, after Friedrich Schiller and Ferdinand Mikovec
Composed 1881 -1882; rev., 1883, 1885, 1894-5

Cast:

Dimitrij Ivanovic, assumed son of Ivan the Terrible, tenor	Leo Marian Vodicka
Marfa Ivanovna, Tsarina; widow of Ivan the Terrible soprano,	Drahomíra Drobková
Marina Mnishkova of the Sandomirs, Dmitri's wife soprano,	Magdaléna Hajyóssová
Xenie Borisovna, daughter of the Tsar Boris Godounov soprano,	Lívia Aghová
Petr Fedorovič Basmanov, commander of the tsar's army, bass;	Peter Mikuláš
Prince Vasilij Sujský, baritone;	Ivan Kusnjer
Jov, Patriarch of Moscow bass;	Luděk Vele

chorus of people of Moscow, boyars and their wives, priests, Polish entourage, soldiers, dancers, pages.
Prague Philharmonic Choir; Prague Radio Chorus
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra: Conductor Gerd Albrecht

In the territory of grand opera Dvořák, for the first time in the history of Czech national opera, succeeded in overcoming the contradiction between a historical opera and a musical drama. He rose up to the tradition represented by Giacomo Meyerbeer and Richard Wagner having understood the essence of both dramatic types, and having developed freely his individuality in a synthesis of their aesthetic premises. With its immense musical wealth and dramatic power, Dimitrij is Antonín Dvořák's most important stage composition, equalled only by Rusalka.

The plot of Dimitrij is a continuation of the story of Boris Godunov, with four characters in common: Dimitrij (assumed son of Ivan the Terrible who, however, genuinely believes in his claim), the Polish Marina of the princely Sandomir family (now his wife), the Russian Xenie (the daughter of Boris Godunov) and Prince Sujsky, surprisingly now a supporter of Boris, and Dimitrij's chief antagonist.

Synopsis

Moscow: 1605 - 1606

Act I After Boris's death the people of Moscow are confused and factionalized. In Moscow's square in front of the Kremlin, people gather after the death of Boris Godunov awaiting the naming of the new tsar. In the meantime, the city is approached by the Polish army led by Dimitrij. Some (led by the Patriarch Jov and Šujsky) continue to support the Godunov family; the people and the boyars, who had taken an oath of allegiance to Godunov's children, decide in favour of Dimitrij as soon as commander Basmanov announces that the army has gone over to his side.

Boris's daughter Xenie, escaping the revolting crowd, takes refuge with Šujsky. The triumphant Dimitrij enters Moscow and meets Marfa, the widow of Ivan the Terrible. Marfa is disappointed to find out that he is not her child, but moved by his behaviour and longing for revenge for the wrong she had suffered, she recognizes him publicly as her son.

Act II. - **Scene 1**: Dimitrij and Marina's wedding is celebrated in the Kremlin. A dispute breaks out after Marina rejects Dimitrij's request that she become a Russian. In the course of the court ball, a controversy erupts between the Russians and the boisterous Poles which is pacified only after Dimitrij's resolute intervention.

Scene 2: Dimitrij searches for peace at the tomb of Ivan the Terrible, in the vault of Uspenski Cathedral. Xenie is hiding there from the drunken Poles. Dimitrij protects her from molestation. A relationship forms between him and Xenie. After she leaves, the boyars arrive led by Šujsky to ally against Dimitrij. When Šujsky swears that the real Dimitrij has long been dead, Dimitrij emerges in front of the surprised plotters and wins the majority of them over for his side.

Act III In the throne hall, Dimitrij remembers Xenia. The Patriarch asks the tsar, in front of the assembled court, to intervene against Polish imperiousness. Xenia pleads for mercy for Šujsky who faces execution. Horrified, she recognizes her protector in the tsar. The pardoning of Šujsky fills the Poles with indignation. Driven by jealousy, Marina reveals to Dimitrij his real origin: he had been passed off for the murdered son of Ivan the Terrible since childhood. In an attempt to prevent the further chaos which would follow his resignation, Dimitrij decides to keep the throne and reject Marina. She is crushed by his heroic stance: he repudiates her.

Act IV In the courtyard of Šujsky's house, Xenia mourns her betrayed love. Dimitrij succeeds in convincing her of the sincerity of his emotions but Xenia holds him responsible for the death of her family and calls on him to live only for the benefit of Russia. Marina takes revenge by having Xenia killed. Caught at the scene of the murder by Šujsky, she reveals Dimitrij's real origin to the astonished people. Šujsky begs Marfa to tell the truth.

Dimitrij himself prevents Marfa from committing perjury Šujsky shoots the false tsar over whose dead body the people pray

For all its resemblance to Meyerbeer's Le prophète (the central figure of an impostor, with a crucial mother—son 'recognition' scene in full public gaze, and the generally French grand-opera conventions), there are vital differences between this opera and an actual French opera on the same subject (Joncières's Dimitri). In the French opera, there is no Russian-Polish confrontation (most of the plot takes place before Dimitrij gets to Russia); whereas Dvořák uses his double-chorus confrontations to great effect for opposing nationalities, and with surprisingly convincing imitations of Orthodox chant. Joncières's hero is a philandering weakling, a lyric tenor caught between mistresses; Dvořák 's Dimitrij is heroic in voice and action and chooses his consorts politically — the Polish Marina discarded for the Russian Xenie. Dvořák's opera unfolds unevenly, but in its dialectic confrontations, particularly that of Marina and Dmitrij in Act 3, and in one of the greatest scenes in all Czech opera, Marfa's hesitation in Act 4, Dvořák shows a handling of dramatic tension that is immensely powerful and unparalleled in his other operas.

Khovanschina

Khovanshchina (Russian: Хованщина,: [xɐˈvanʲɕːɪnə], sometimes rendered The Khovansky Affair) is an opera (subtitled a 'national music drama') in five acts by Modest Mussorgsky. The work was written between 1872 and 1880 in St. Petersburg, Russia. The composer wrote the libretto based on historical sources. The opera was almost finished in piano score when the composer died in 1881, but the orchestration was almost entirely lacking.

Like Mussorgsky's earlier Boris Godunov, Khovanshchina deals with an episode in Russian history, first brought to the composer's attention by his friend the critic Vladimir Stasov. It concerns the rebellion of Prince Ivan Khovansky, the Old Believers, and the Muscovite Streltsy against the regent Sofia Alekseyevna and the two young Tsars Peter the Great and Ivan V, who were attempting to institute Westernizing reforms in Russia. Khovansky had helped to foment the Moscow Uprising of 1682, which resulted in Sofia becoming regent on behalf of her younger brother Ivan and half-brother Peter, who were crowned joint Tsars. In the fall of 1682 Prince Ivan Khovansky turned against Sofia. Supported by the Old Believers and the Streltsy, Khovansky – who supposedly wanted to install himself as the new regent – demanded the reversal of Patriarch Nikon's reforms. Sofia and her court were forced to flee Moscow. Eventually, Sofia managed to suppress the so-called Khovanshchina (Khovansky affair) with the help of the diplomat Fyodor Shaklovity, who succeeded Khovansky as leader of the Muscovite Streltsy. With the rebellion crushed, the Old Believers committed mass suicide (in the opera, at least).

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov completed, revised, and orchestrated Khovanshchina in 1881–1882. In 1958, Dmitri Shostakovich was commissioned to revise and reorchestrate the opera for a film version released the following year. It is the Shostakovich version which is now usually performed. In 1913, Igor Stravinsky and Maurice Ravel made their own arrangement at Sergei Diaghilev's request. When Feodor Chaliapin refused to sing the part of Dosifey in any other orchestration than Rimsky-Korsakov's, Diaghilev's company employed a mixture of orchestrations which did not prove successful. The Stravinsky-Ravel orchestration was forgotten, except for Stravinsky's finale, which is sometimes still used and is heard in the recording we feature.

Although the background of the opera comprises the Moscow Uprising of 1682 and the Khovansky affair a few months later, its main themes are the struggle between progressive

and reactionary political factions during the minority of Tsar Peter the Great and the passing of old Muscovy before Peter's westernizing reforms. It received its first performance in the Rimsky-Korsakov edition in 1886.

Cast

Prince Ivan Khovansky, head of the Streltsy	bass	Aage Haugland
Prince Andrey Khovansky, his son	tenor	Vladimir Atlantov
Prince Vasily Golitsin	tenor	Vladimir Popov
Dosifey, head of the schismatics (Old Believers)	bass	Paata Burchuladze
Boyar Fyodor Shaklovity	baritone	Anatolij Kotscherga
Marfa, a schismatic	mezzo-soprano	Marjana Lipovsek
Susanna, an old schismatic	soprano	Brigitte Poschner-Klebel
Scrivener	tenor	Heinz Zednik
Emma, a maiden from the German quarter	soprano	Joanna Borowska
Varsonofyev, a retainer of Golitsin	baritone	Peter Koves
Kuzka, a strelets (musketeer)	tenor	Wilfried Gahmlich

Chorus: Streltsy, schismatics, serving girls and Persian slaves of Prince Ivan Khovansky, people

Vienna State Opera Chorus; Slovak Philharmonic Choir; Vienna Boys Choir,Vienna State Opera Orchestra. Claudio Abbado, conductor

Synopsis

Time: The year 1682

Place: Moscow

Act 1

Moscow, Red Square

In the morning in the Red Square, a member of the Streltsy (named Kuzka) sings his drunkenness off while two other Streltsy talk about their rowdy activities the night before. A scribe arrives; they all pick on him and then leave. Shaklovity, a Boyar and agent for the regent and the Tsars, enters and dictates a letter to the court, warning of a rebellion planned by Prince Ivan Khovansky (captain of the Streltsy Guards) and the Old Believers. After finishing the letter he warns the scribe not to repeat what he heard. The scribe, terrified by the prospect of being involved in a political intrigue, signs the letter with a false name. [The crowd enters and they force the scribe to read a new proclamation that has been published in the public square, which describes the atrocities committed by the Streltsy. The crowd laments the state of Russia.] Prince Ivan Khovansky enters promising an adoring crowd that he will defend the "young Tsars" (Ivan V and Peter I). He and the crowd exit.

Prince Andrey, Khovansky's son, chases in Emma, a Lutheran German girl, intending to assault her. Marfa, an Old Believer and Andrey's former fiancée, interferes. Andrey threatens to kill Marfa, but Prince Ivan returns and decides to capture Emma himself. The ensuing quarrel between father and son is interrupted by the arrival of Dosifey, the leader of the Old Believers. Dosifey berates everyone for being so quarrelsome and un-Christian, and asks them all to join the Old Believers in reuniting Russia. Prince Ivan Khovansky leaves with Prince Andrey Khovansky. Marfa leaves with Emma. Dosifey, left alone, prays for the future of Russia.

Act 2

Summer study of Prince Vasily Golitsin

Golitsin, a nervous progressive nobleman, reads letters from his lover [and his mother, who warns him to keep himself pure]. [A German Lutheran pastor enters to complain of the murder of one of the scribes in his community by the Streltsy and Prince Andrey Khovansky's pursuit of Emma. Prince Golitsin tries to appease the pastor and offers some form of political advantage that the pastor promises to collect later, although Golitsin flatly refuses to let him build another church; then the Prince wonders about the true motives behind the pastor's actions]. The Prince hires Marfa to tell his fortune in secret. She predicts that he will fall from power and face exile; he dismisses her and orders his servant to kill her. Once alone he ponders on all the acts that he has made to advance Russia, but is interrupted when Prince Ivan Khovansky enters without being announced. (Ivan is ironically disrespecting Golitsin, who himself reformed the tradition of announcing noble visitors.) Prince Khovansky complains that Golitsin has been interfering with his friends in the nobility and diminishing the privileges of nobility, and states that only Tartars believe that all men are equal, and questions whether Russia shall become "tartarized". A quarrel ensues, [each making insulting remarks about the other's military campaigns,] but Dosifey enters and draws their attention away from their argument by criticising both of them: Golitsin for his modern views, and Prince Ivan for letting the Streltsy get drunk and run around making trouble all the time. [In the discussion with Dosifey it turns out that he was once Prince Myshetsky who renounced all worldly matters, to which Prince Ivan Khovansky says that a Prince must die a Prince.] Marfa comes back, there has been an attempt on her life but she was saved by the Petrovtsy (the Tsar's personal army). After her enters Shaklovity, who menacingly announces that the Tsar has been warned of the planned rebellion and has issued orders to arrest the Princes Khovansky. Without resolving the drama, the act ends.

Act 3

The Streltsy Quarter, south of the Moscow River

As Old Believers chant a hymn for the future of Russia, Marfa sings of her lost love for Prince Andrey Khovansky. [Susanna, a fellow Old Believer, scolds Marfa until Dosifey appears and drives Susanna away.] Marfa admits to Dosifey that she still loves Prince Andrey Khovansky. Dosifey tells her to pray for relief. They exit and Shaklovity, who until now had been presented as a purely threatening character, sings a haunting prayer for troubled Russia's protection from the Streltsy (he refers to them as "mercenaries") and from the rebellious powers they obey. Hearing them coming he exits; some of the Streltsy enter and sing a drinking chorus followed by their wives who scold them about their drinking. [The soldiers ask Kuzka to help them with their wives; he ends up organizing an entire celebration with all the Streltsy and their women.] The scribe arrives and informs them that Tsar Peter's troops have initiated an attack on Streltsy-Russian soldiers. The Streltsy call their leader, Prince Ivan Khovansky, who enters and begs their forgiveness for declining to lead them into retaliation; the new Tsar is very powerful, he explains, and their time of power is over.

Act 4

Scene 1: A richly furnished chamber in Prince Ivan Khovansky's palace

Prince Ivan Khovansky is being entertained by the women in his retinue but they are interrupted by a servant of Golitsin (Varsonofyev) who has come to warn him that he is in

danger. Prince Ivan Khovansky ignores the warning and has the messenger flogged. He orders his Persian slaves to dance for him. Shaklovity enters and stabs Khovansky to death. Shaklovity scornfully imitates the servants' song over the Prince's corpse.

Scene 2: Moscow. The square before the Cathedral of Vasiliy the Blessed

Prince Golitsin is led into exile. Dosifey mourns the conspirators' downfall and the success of Tsar Peter and learns that the Imperial Council has decreed that the Old Believers are next. He discusses with Marfa that an everlasting example must be set by the Old Believers and agree that they shall immolate themselves. Prince Andrey Khovansky enters and confronts Marfa about where she hid Emma, but Marfa tells him that she is safely on her way back to Germany, her father and fiancé. Prince Andrey Khovansky threatens that he will have her burnt as a witch and calls for the Streltsy with his horn but instead a menacing sound is heard. Marfa offers sanctuary to Prince Andrey Khovansky with the Old Believers after she tells him of his father's murder. The Streltsy are led to their execution. Tsar Peter, through an agent, intervenes to pardon them.

Act 5

A pine forest, a secluded monastery, a moonlit night

Dosifey and his followers have taken refuge in a hermitage in the forest. Although he is weighed down by the sorrows and sufferings of the brethren, he remains defiant and determined to win a "crown of glory" in fire and flame ("Here, in this holy place"). He exhorts the brethren to don white clothing and light candles, preparing for immolation. They enter the hermitage. Prince Andrey Khovansky enters, singing of his lost love, still seeking Emma. Marfa sings to him, reminding him of their own love, and assuring him that she will not leave him. Dosifey and the brethren return, dressed in white and carrying candles. They build a funeral pyre. Offstage trumpet calls herald the approach of Tsar Peter's soldiers. Marfa sings to Andrey of the hopelessness of their situation. The trumpet calls sound again. Dosifey exhorts the brethren to remain strong one last time. Marfa lights the pyre. The schismatics sing a final hymn ("God will save me") as Dosifey, Marfa, Prince Andrey Khovansky and the Old Believers perish in the flames. [Tsar Peter's Preobrazhensky soldiers arrive in a vain attempt to capture them.] [Shostakovich version only: As the flames die away, the moon rises over the forest and the crowd from Moscow enters, reprising their act 1 lament for the state of Russia.]

Mussorgsky's original vocal score remained unfinished. The final portion of the libretto must be reconstructed from Mussorgsky's themes. The Rimsky-Korsakov edition (1883) adds to the final hymn figures representing flames, trumpet fanfares, and a final reprise of the "March of the Preobrazhensky Regiment" that concludes act 4. The Stravinsky version of the finale (1913) follows Mussorgsky's notes more closely in that the ending fades away. The Shostakovich version attempts to provide a musical conclusion of the opera by bringing back the theme of the sunrise from the Prelude to the opera.