

## **KHOVANSCHINA**

Modest Mussorgsky

**Act I.** Russia 1682. A patrol of Streltsy (musketeers) gathers at dawn in Moscow's Red Square, boasting how they massacred political foes during the night. When a Public Scribe opens his stall, the boyar Shaklovity dictates an anonymous letter to Czar Peter and the Imperial Council incriminating the Khovansky family and a fanatical religious sect, the Old Believers, of plotting to overthrow the throne. The populace then hails the arrival of Prince Ivan Khovansky, commander of the Streltsy, who praises his men for routing out traitors. When the crowd disperses, Khovansky's young son Andrei tries to force his attentions on Emma, a girl from the German Lutheran quarter, who is protected by Marfa, a seeress and one of the Old Believers. The elder Khovansky also fancies Emma and orders the Streltsy to take her to his palace. Father and son quarrel over the girl until Dosifei, patriarch of the Old Believers, intervenes.

**Act II.** In his palace, Prince Vasily Golitsyn, counselor and erstwhile lover of the regent Princess Sophia, reads a letter from her with mistrust. Golitsyn summons Marfa to cast his horoscope, and despite her fears, she divines his future in a bowl of water, foretelling betrayal, disgrace, poverty and exile. Horrified, Golitsyn dismisses the seeress, ordering a henchman, Varsonofiev, to drown her in a nearby marsh. Alone and in despair, Golitsyn muses on the end of his hopes for Russia, whose links to other nations he has sought to strengthen. Suddenly Ivan Khovansky bursts in, bitterly accusing Golitsyn of weakening the powers of the nobles. As accusations fly, only the unexpected appearance of Dosifei prevents violence. Dosifei, himself the former Prince Mychetsky, urges the two to ally with him and save Russia through a return to the old beliefs. Marfa rushes in, having narrowly escaped death when the czar's bodyguard appeared, freeing her from her pursuer. Shaklovity returns to say the czar has accused the Khovanskys of treason, dubbing their schemes "Khovanshchina."

Outside the home of Ivan Khovansky in the Streltsy quarter of Moscow, the Old Believers proclaim their triumph over heresy. Marfa, once betrothed to Prince Andrei, cannot forget her love for him. Dosifei comforts her and leads her away. Shaklovity enters, obsessed with fears of Russia's doom, withdrawing as the Streltsy boisterously return home, boasting of prowess in drink and battle. Their womenfolk rebuke them until the Scribe reports that foreign mercenaries, aided by the czar's guard, are coming to attack the Streltsy. At this the Streltsy implore Ivan Khovansky to counterattack, but fearing the czar's power, he tells them to submit. Terrified, the Streltsy and their wives pray for deliverance.

**Act III.** At Khovansky's house, Prince Ivan feasts while serving maidens perform folk songs. Varsonofiev interrupts to tell him his life is in peril, but he ignores the warning, summoning Persian slave girls to dance. Shaklovity then approaches with news that Princess Sophia wishes Khovansky to attend an important meeting of the Imperial Council. Refusing at first, he relents and dresses in ceremonial robes, his serving maidens hailing him as a "white swan." As Khovansky is about to leave, he is assassinated. Shaklovity contemptuously quotes the song of the "white swan" over his body.

In St. Basil's Square, bystanders watch Golitsyn being sent into exile. Dosifei appears, finding divine judgment in the downfall of Khovansky and Golitsyn, who could not rise above selfish quarrels. But Marfa arrives to report that the Old Believers will be next: the czar is sending troops to destroy their hermitage. Seeing martyrdom at hand, Dosifei tells Marfa to bring Andrei along, so his soul can be saved, but the young prince, still infatuated with Emma, refuses Marfa's

entreaties until the Streltsy are herded into the square for execution. Terrified, he leaves with Marfa before a herald, Streshnev, rushes in to announce that the czar has pardoned the Streltsy. In a forest near Moscow, the Old Believers assemble at their hermitage, resolved to die on a funeral pyre rather than surrender. Dosifei leads them inside, telling them to stand fast and ascend to eternal life. Andrei's thoughts are still with Emma, but Marfa tells him to remember their love. As distant trumpets announce the troops' approach, the Old Believers set fire to their hermitage and meet death in the purifying flames.