No opera has met with a fate as harsh or involved as that which befell Moussorgsky’s “Khovanshchina.” It was not staged at all in the composer’s lifetime. It was deemed unfinished, although the famous Russian critic Vladimir Stasov said of it: “Moussorgsky has left his ‘Khovanshchina’, entirely finished, but not orchestrated.” For a long time the opera was known to the public in the orchestral version Rimsky-Korsakov gave it. Rimsky-Korsakov was concerned to have the work of his deceased friend produced on the stage, which meant getting it past the censors and that is why he deleted many of the “dangerous” places.

But even then “Khovanshchina” could not find a producer: its hero is the people; the Dissenters were not recognized by the tsar or church, and could not figure on the imperial stage.

Not until the turn of the 20th century did Moussorgsky’s operas find an avenue to the public, and that through the efforts of the composer’s friends and admirers, and the brilliant career of the singer Chaliapin. But as soon as they saw the light of day, the operas were accorded immediate and worldwide recognition.

In our time Professor Pavel Lyam has summed up his study of Moussorgsky’s manuscripts by the publication of the complete piano score of “Khovanshchina.” This version is truer to the original dramatic and musical intentions of the composer.

The idea of doing a film of this great opera first came to me when I was making my picture of Moussorgsky’s musical drama “Boris Godunov.”

Later, as my work with script-writer Anna Abramova and composer Dmitry Shostakovich progressed, we came to feel even more that only on the screen could one do full justice to the original composer and wonderful dramatist, Moussorgsky, who built up his conflicts with Shakespearean dynamics and drew the characters and ideas-images of his folk tragedy with hold and vivid strokes.

“Khovanshchina” is interesting to translate into the language of the cinema both as a historical canvas which reproduces events never portrayed on the screen before, and as a highly patriotic work by a distinguished musician, expressive of his belief in the spiritual might of his people.

Dmitry Shostakovich orchestrated the entire opera expressly for the film on the basis of the composer’s original manuscripts. He included in his version all the scenes that had been deleted before and wrote a new score for the end of the last act. The work Shostakovich has done on the opera will stand as a big contribution to the history of world music.

The action of “Khovanshchina” is laid in Russia at the end of the 17th century, and centres around the mutiny of the Streltsi regiments, the religious dissension that tore at the Church, and the confusion that reigned among the boyars.

It is a time of unrest, especially for Moscow. The conspirators have just crowned Tsarevna Sophia; the real heir to the throne, Ioann and Peter, are too young. Though Peter is still a child, Sophia and the boyars foresee the arrival of a troubled time of reforms, when the old foundations will crumble and the rule of the boyars fall.

The opera brings out brilliantly the struggle between three political currents (typical, by the way, of the age in which Moussorgsky himself lived). One is the cruel, bloodthirsty monarchy as represented by the head of the Streltsi, Prince Khovansky; the second is the “enlightened liberalism” of the semi-European prince Vasili Golitsyn; the third is the popular current as represented by Dosiphei, who idealized the old Dissenters’ communes. The people among the Streltsi masses are betrayed and deceived by Prince Khovansky. The Dissenters and Dosiphei sense that they are doomed, but rather than submit, have recourse to self-martyrdom. Meanwhile the “wanderers” or landless peasants daringly introduced into the action by Moussorgsky stand aside from the struggle between these political parties, appraising and passing judgement on events and so expressing the composer’s own thoughts and hopes of a better future.

One of the most appealing characters in the opera is the Dissenter Marfa, or erstwhile princess Sitskaya, who has “gone among the people.” Complex historical developments and dramatic personal motives impel her to accept her cruel death without flinching when further struggle proves impossible.

For all the tragedy of the denouement, the opera is optimistic in tenor, for it is infused with profound faith in the strength of the people.

VERA STROYEVA producer.
Composer Dmitry Shostakovitch has collaborated most actively in the reorchestration and recording of the score of the film "Khovanshchina". Here, with Vera Stroyeva, director and producer of the film, are seen here discussing the script.
"In arranging ‘Khovanshchina’ for orchestra I followed Moussorgsky’s scores most strictly. I was able to include the scenes left out in the Rimsky-Korsakov’s original version because of the tsarist censors.

"That this great musical tragedy has now, thanks to the efforts of producer and director Vera Stroyeva, her assistants and all the performers, been worthily screened in a form that brings out Moussorgsky’s profound ideas and love for the people, is a source of the deepest satisfaction to me.

"The Bolshoi Theatre choir and orchestra have coped with their task with credit, while the spirited and perceptive conducting of talented young Yevgeni Svetlanov deserves special mention.

"I am certain that the choice of performers, both for the leading and incidental parts, will please audiences and that they will particularly appreciate the fine performances given by Mark Reisen as Dosiphei, Alexei Krivchenya as Prince Ivan Khovansky, Kira Leonova as Marfa and above all, a joy to behold and hear Victor Nechipallo’s profound interpretation of the folk leader.

"I am deeply convinced that this successful effort will stimulate the screening of operas as an independent genre of film art.

D. SHOSTAKOVICH
The opening shots: Moscow in the 17th century. Its heart — the Kremlin and Red Square. On sentry duty near the Kremlin is the young Streltsi warrior Kuzka, seated beside a pillar erected in honour of the former exploits of the Streltsi troops. We shall see quite a bit of him in the film.
Khovanshchina. That is the name Russian history gives to the comparatively short period packed with dramatic events in which the Strelets were the chief actors. The period came to a tragic end with the execution of Prince Ivan Khovansky and his son Andrei on September 17, 1682.

Who were the Strelets, what role did they play in the social life of that remote period, and why did many of them come to the executioner's block and the gallows? Why, in a word, did Moussorgsky turn to the Khovanshchina period for the subject of his opera?

That, briefly, is what we shall now tell you in order that you may fully understand and appreciate the new picture.

The Strelets were the first regular Russian foot soldiers equipped with firearms. They were formed by Tsar Ivan the Terrible in 1550. Drawn from the population at large, they lived in special settlements where besides military pursuits they also engaged in handicrafts and trade. Gradually they lost their importance as a militant force and became more of a police force. The tsars and various court groups began to use them for personal and party intrigues. The Strelets became prominent in various palace upheavals and mutinies. Their leaders were thus able to influence and even sway the course of political and economic events. Naturally that brought down on their heads the displeasure of the autocratic tsars. The power and strength of the Strelets were restricted and localised. Attempts by individual boyars to use the Strelets openly in opposition to the tsar were mercilessly crushed. A striking case was that of Khovansky, who wanted to usurp the throne. The Strelets regiments were finally disbanded by Peter I in 1698.

What attracted Moussorgsky in the story was undoubtedly its dramatic aspect and the possibilities it gave him of depicting Russian life comprehensively, and describing the moods and aspirations of the people. In one of his letters Moussorgsky spoke of his desire to create an all-round picture of his people, their joys and sorrows — to depict "Mother Russia in all her simple big-heartedness".

Its folk quality and brilliant portrayal of the Russian national character and Russian spirit are what make "Khovanshchina" a great and beautiful opera. And all that is best in it is skilfully and effectively recaptured in the film "Khovanshchina".
The dramatic structure of the opera is based on the struggle between the old and the new, between the outgoing and the incoming Russia. The old is exemplified by the boyars, with their intrigues and clinging to everything retrogressive; by the worst side of the Streltsi — their plots and mutinies inspired by the lust for power, wealth and fame. The new is represented by the growing political maturity of the people and their incipient understanding of the great historical mission they shall perform. The idea of the people is embodied in the film by the “wanderers” or landless and homeless peasants and jobless handicraftsmen. The opera shows the people, in the broadest sense of the word, to be pure of heart, just, and intolerant of lies or evil.
Russia was ruled then by Tsarevna Sophia. Her chief retainer and favourite was Prince Vasily Golitsyn, who has a big part in the film version of the opera.

The hoyar Shaklovity (on the left) has arrived at the palace of Prince Golitsyn with an important message for Prince Ivan Khovansky. His message causes surprise and consternation.

One of the loveliest and most original characters in Moussorgsky's musical drama — the girl Marfa. She is a member of the Dissenter's Sect, and with all her strong and passionate nature she is fanatically pledged to her faith. She is more than just a religious fanatic — she has the saintly gift of divine foresight. Not only can she read the future for others, but she knows what her own tragic fate will be. She is not afraid, and goes out bravely to meet it. The scene of Marfa's prophecy is one of the best in world opera. It is brilliantly staged in the film, with effects that only the art of the cinema can achieve. Marfa's voice rings powerfully and ominously under the domed halls.
Some of the most picturesque episodes in the film are laid in the Streltsi settlement near Moscow. The bright red uniforms of the soldiers and gaudy dresses of the women — the noise, laughter, jokes, mock fights... and then the thrilling song of earthly injustice, the satirical song of slander breaking in and drawing out everything else. The singer is the dashing young Kuzka, charmer of the Streltsi wives. He is the same Kuzka we saw at the beginning of the film on Red Square. The Streltsi settlement is gay and noisy. Before long, however, its inhabitants will be caught in a whirlpool of events of quite another tenor, events formidable and dramatic.
The famous Soviet ballerina Maia Plisetskaya appears in the film as a Persian girl. She does a magnificently fiery dance.

The Khovansky Palace rings merriment. A girls' chorus sings praises of the conceited, amorous Prince Ivan. Persian girls dance for the Prince, whose ornate dress glittering with gold and precious stones. Surely he well in these sumptuous halls? — no! — a sense of pending trouble breaks over the palace. It soon materialises in the appearance of Tsarevna Sophia's envoy with a summons for Prince Ivan. He is proud beyond words of the honour shown him, as he thinks. But Tsarevna Sophia does not want to see Khovansky. She has sent her man to the palace to kill him. As soon as he steps outside, a knife sinks into his heart.
Bad times follow soon for the Strelets too. Here, there, and everywhere they are seized, imprisoned, chained, tortured. The execution square has been prepared for the performance of its grim act. The executioners have put on their long crimson shirts, the colour of blood, and sharpened their axes. They draw up beside the blocks; the Strelets await their doom. But their end has not quite come yet. Their regiment, though shorn of its former power, will conserve itself a little while longer. Its life hangs by a thread, but it still breathes.

The boyar Shaklovity, one of the Tsarevna's spies and informers chosen to smell out the plots of the princes and boyars and do her secret bidding. It was his knife that killed Ivan Khovansky.
The ghastly preparations on the execution square proved no more than an awe-inspiring rehearsal.

At the last minute, Sophia pardoned the Streltsy and called off the execution. The axes that had just been raised over their heads were lowered without spilling a drop of blood.
In the last episodes of the film, the self-inflicted martyrdom of a large group of Dissenters is reenacted. Hidden in the forest stands a huge wooden monastery where the adherents of the old Church took their vows and lived in seclusion. The Dissenters did not fight openly against the New Church authority, but expressed their opposition to it passively by retiring from the world. Their struggle took strange forms. To burn themselves openly in sight of all is also an unusual way of expressing their protest against tsarist rule and the injustice of the world. The large wooden monastery bursts into flame. The fire rages and envelopes the whole building. Hundreds of voices inside rise in song, and over them all rings the merry voice of their leader, Dosiphei.

All the resources of cinematography are utilized with maximum effect to convey the dramatic power of Moussorgsky’s immortal opera on the screen. The wide screen becomes truly wide, especially when the superbly rehearsed mass scenes come on. What vast, breath-taking panoramas, what wonderful pyrotechnical effects! Skilful use of light and colour give the scenes an extraordinary emotional tang, and raise them up to the thrilling level of the music, in itself so stirring.

Add to that the fact that the best singers of the Moscow opera fill the roles in the film, and its success seems ensured. The orchestra is also one of the best in the world — the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra.

Screenplay by Dmitry Shostakovich, Anna Abramova and Vera Stroyeva
Direction by Vera Stroyeva
Camera by Victor Dombrovsky
Sets by Alexander Borisov
Conductor — Yevgeni Svetlanov

The Cast
Dosiphei, the Dissenters' Leader — Mark Reizen
Prince Ivan Khovansky — Alexei Krivchyanya
Prince Andrei Khovansky — Anton Grigoriev
Prince Vasili Golitsyn — Vladimir Petrov
Boyar Shakhovity — Yevgeni Kibkalo
Marfa the Dissenter — Kira Leonova
Kuzka, the young Streitsi warrior — Alexei Madlennik
The leader of the plain people — Victor Nechipaio

Made in USSR

Only a few precious minutes remain to the end. The beautiful Marfa and her beloved, Prince Andrei enter the flaming monastery, to die like the rest...