Scene 1 – Outside the Novodyevichy Monastery, near Moscow, 1598
Russian peasants are goaded by police into demonstrating for Boris Godunov’s ascension to the vacant throne of Russia. Shchelkalov, secretary of the Duma (Council of Boyars), announces that Boris still refuses the throne of Russia and requests that they pray that he will relent. A procession of pilgrims passes, praying for help.

Scene 2 – A square in the Kremlin, 1598
Amidst cheering crowds, the great bells of Moscow herald the coronation of Boris. As the procession leaves the cathedral, Boris appears in triumph. Haunted by a strange foreboding, he prays for God’s blessing. Addressing his people, he invites them all to a feast, as the crowd continues rejoicing.

Scene 3 – A cell in the Chudov Monastery, 1603
In a dark cell of the Chudov monastery, the old monk Pimen is in his cell finishing his history of Russia. The novice Grigory awakens from a nightmare and asks Pimen about the dead Tsarevich Dimitri, legal heir to the Russian throne. Pimen recounts how Boris ordered the murder of the boy (who would by now have been Grigory’s age) so that he could become tsar, himself. Alone, Grigory fumes over Boris’s crime and devises a plan to take justice into his own hands.

Scene 4 – An inn near the Lithuanian border
On the Lithuanian border, an Innkeeper welcomes three guests—two noisy drunken friars, Varlaam and Missail, and Grigory, who has now assumed the role of the Pretender Dimitri but is concealing himself for fear of capture. Varlaam passes the time with a song about the siege of Kazan and then dozes off. Grigory questions the innkeeper, learning to his alarm that sentries have been posted to intercept a fugitive; however, she can tell him a way around them. The guards arrive. The officer has a warrant for the arrest of a renegade monk, and although he cannot read it, he assumes it must be Varlaam that he is seeking. Grigory reads the warrant for him, substituting Varlaam’s description for his own. But when Varlaam reads the true description, Grigory escapes.

Scene 5 – The Tsar’s apartments in the Imperial Palace, Moscow
The Tsarevich Fyodor is working on a map, while his sister Xenia laments the death of her betrothed. The nurse attempts to comfort Xenia. Boris enters and, looking at the map, tells Fyodor that one day all this will be his realm. Boris reflects that although he now stands in supreme power, his reign has brought him no happiness. Prince Shuisky is announced by a boyar who also whispers that Shuisky and others were conspiring that night and awaiting news from a messenger from Krakow. Shuisky brings word that a pretender has arisen in Poland and gathered the support of the King, the Pope, and the
nobles. Boris is shaken when told that the pretender claims to be Dimitri and asks how a buried child can march on the Tsar. He promises to forgive Shuisky all his former acts of treason if he will answer truthfully whether or not the real Dimitri was indeed killed at Uglich. Assuring Boris that he was, Shuisky leaves. Boris gives way to his terror, imagining that he sees Dimitri’s ghost. Stricken with remorse, he begs God’s forgiveness for his crime.

**Scene 6 – Outside of the Cathedral of St. Basil, Moscow**
The starving Russian peasants, now disenchanted with Boris, argue whether or not Tsarevich Dimitri still lives as news reaches them that his troops are near. A group of urchins runs in, tormenting a simpleton and finally stealing his last coin. Boris and his retinue enter. The simpleton asks Boris to kill the urchins the way he killed Dimitri. Boris protects him from Shuisky’s order that he be arrested. Referring to him as a holy man, Boris asks the simpleton to pray for him. But the simpleton refuses, saying he cannot pray for a Herod. He prophesies tears and blood flowing in Russia’s future.

**Scene 7 – The Granovitaya Hall in the Kremlin, 1605**
At a special session of the Council of Boyars, an edict against the Pretender is being drawn up. Shchelkalov reads it aloud and the boyars debate the phrasing and context. Shuisky rushes in with the astonishing account of how he observed Boris’s anguish over the imagined apparition of the murdered Dimitri. The boyars’ protests are silenced by the appearance of Boris himself, echoing Shuisky’s description; the child lives, he insists, and Shuisky shall be punished for saying otherwise. Shuisky distracts Boris by saying that Pimen is waiting outside for an audience with the Tsar, to which Boris agrees. The old monk has a tale to tell of a shepherd, blind from childhood, who was summoned by Tsarevich Dimitri to pray at his grave. He obeyed and thus miraculously found his sight restored. Boris falls with a cry. Feeling his death near, he calls for Fyodor. Boris bids him farewell and tells him to rule wisely, upholding the Orthodox faith. To the solemn tolling of the bells, he prays and begs forgiveness. Pointing to his son as the new Tsar, Boris collapses and dies.