

## **MODEST MUSSORGSKY *Pictures from an Exhibition***

BORN: March 21, 1839, in Karevo, Pskov district, Russia

DIED: March 28, 1881, in Saint Petersburg

WORK COMPOSED: for piano in 1874, this arrangement in 1922 by Maurice Ravel

WORLD PREMIERE: October 22, 1922, in Paris; Serge Koussevitzky conducting

INSTRUMENTATION: Three flutes (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> doubling piccolo), three oboes (3<sup>rd</sup> doubling English horn), two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, alto saxophone, timpani, percussion (xylophone, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, whip, ratchet, cymbals, bass drum, glockenspiel, suspended cymbal, chime), two harps, celesta and strings. Duration: 35 minutes.

Modest Mussorgsky was largely a self-taught composer and his high intellect aided him in discovering ways of writing that other composers would never consider. This made him one of the most unique Russian composers of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and paved the way for the next generation of Impressionist composers Debussy and Ravel. However, Mussorgsky's life was disjointed, ending in poverty and loneliness brought about from his acute alcoholism. At the time of his death, only a week after his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday, some of his most important compositions were left unfinished.

The sudden death of the artist Viktor Hartmann (1834-1873), his close friend, had an extraordinary impact on Mussorgsky. The following year there was a posthumous exhibit of Hartmann's drawings and watercolors which inspired Mussorgsky to honor his friend in his work for piano, *Pictures from an Exhibition*. The inspiration was so strong that Mussorgsky wrote of his progress to his friend Vladimir Stasov (who helped organize the exhibition, which included over 400 of Hartmann's works), "Ideas, melodies, come to me of their own accord. Like roast pigeons in the story, I gorge and gorge and over-eat myself. I can hardly manage to put it all down on paper fast enough." Mussorgsky wrote the entire score in twenty days (June 2-22, 1874). The complete title reads: *Pictures from an Exhibition – A Remembrance of Viktor Hartmann*. (A little word about the title. I have found numerous instances where the word 'from' is replaced with 'at' in researching information about this work. I have chosen to stick with the title offered by "The Grove New Dictionary of Music and Musicians" which uses 'from'; Ravel's title is *Tableaux d'une exposition*.)

There is probably no other work that has been arranged as extensively as *Pictures*. No less than twenty versions exist for various sizes of orchestras, as well as six versions for concert band. There are also versions by Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Duke Ellington, Isao Tomita (for synthesizer) and Gary Karr for double bass and piano! Maurice Ravel produced the most commonly performed version in 1922 that was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky. Koussevitzky worked out an agreement with the publisher of the piano suite that allowed him to publish the orchestra version through his company, which also gave him sole conducting rights for several years. In 1930 he made the first recording of Ravel's score with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The exclusive nature of Koussevitzky's commission prompted many of the other versions until Ravel's score became available for general use.

One might imagine promenading through a gallery, glancing at the various works of art being presented. Every now and then a particular piece pulls you in for a more detailed observation. This is essentially the format Mussorgsky uses in *Pictures*. The striding Promenade theme opens the work leading to the first stop, *Gnomus*. Hartmann's sketch is of a carved wooden nutcracker in the form of a wizened gnome who breaks the shells in his jaws. The twitching and snapping of

the music portrays the grotesque old gnome. Let's wander away from that image and soon we are drawn into the image of an old castle in Italy, *Il vecchio castello*. It's a lonely scene and a troubadour (alto saxophone) sings a sad song. Well that was a little depressing, we'll move on from there and oh wait, what is this? The scene, *Tuileries*, is set with children frolicking and quarrelling in a Parisian garden. Next to that is *Bydlo (Cattle)* depicting a Polish peasant driving an oxcart. It's a heavy load and the oxen are steadily and painfully pulling this load along the path. In an almost ponderous mood we make our way along the hall to the *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*. Hartmann depicts ballet dancers in eggshell costumes. Not far from that is the drawing of *Two Polish Jews, One Rich, the Other Poor*. The names *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle* were added later and are not in Mussorgsky's score. The haughty pronouncements from the rich man are satirized by the winds and strings and the subservient beggar is represented by the stuttering trumpets. The hustle and bustle of a French market place occupied by excited peasant women is the subject of the next piece of art, *Limoges*. Soon our eyes are captured by *Catacombs*, the dark image of an ancient catacomb in Rome. Appropriately the next Promenade is stated in a minor-key, which Mussorgsky titled in Latin *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua (With the dead in a dead language)*. We carefully pull ourselves away from this image and come upon *The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)*. The witch Baba Yaga lives in a hut suspended on chicken legs and demonically rides through the air as we are teased with a hint of Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*. We have finally reached the most elegant and regal *Great Gate of Kiev*. Grand ceremony, priests chanting and bells clanging depict the grandeur of this ancient gate, one of three which were built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to fortify Kiev. The structure was dismantled in the Middle Ages and no images of the original gate have survived. The Soviet authorities 'rebuilt' the gate in 1982 amid immense controversy for there were many competing models of how the original gate might have appeared.

I can't help but be reminded of a trip years ago to the Franklin Mint Museum in Wawa, Pennsylvania before it closed. The exhibition was of art inspired by music done by Russian school children. I was intrigued seeing artwork by 10-16 year-old children depicting their images of works by Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Mussorgsky and others. It makes me wish that I had taken some pictures of these works. Interesting that Mussorgsky wrote music to depict art and these young children made art to depict music. The power and impact of the arts live on.

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