

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition

Written: 1874

Movements: Fifteen

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

In the latter half of the nineteenth century a group of five young, self-taught Russian composers consciously broke from the German musical traditions of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, and set out to invent a distinctly Russian style of music. The music critic Vladimir Stassov called this group “The Mighty Handful” (or “The Five”). Modest Mussorgsky was the most individual composer of the lot. He was undisciplined, had a drinking problem, and rarely finished any of the many compositions he started.

Russian painters and architects were also trying to establish a nationalist style at the same time as the “Five.” The ubiquitous Vladimir Stassov introduced Mussorgsky to the artist Viktor Hartmann and they soon became good friends. Shortly after Hartmann’s death at the age of 39 in 1873, Stassov helped organize a commemorative retrospective of his works at the St. Petersburg Society of Architects. It was at that exhibition that Mussorgsky decided to compose a tribute to his friend, a series of vignettes for solo piano based upon various works of the artist. Although it is a monumental showpiece for piano, its current blockbuster reputation is the result of another Russian, the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who asked Maurice Ravel to recast it for orchestra. That version received its premier in Paris in 1923.

Pictures at an Exhibition begins with a “Promenade”, a short bit of music that returns several times between the various movements. Its constantly shifting beat patterns, back and forth from six to five, portray Mussorgsky himself at the Exhibition. Stassov describes it as “moving now to the left, now to the right, now wandering about aimlessly, now eagerly making for one of the pictures.” Gnomus is Hartmann’s design for a nutcracker in the shape of a gnome with huge jaws. In “Il vecchio castello”, a troubadour stands singing in front of an old Italian castle. In Ravel’s orchestration, the troubadour is a saxophonist! Mussorgsky gave “Tuileries” a subtitle: “Children Quarreling After Play.” Here nurses observe the children in the gardens of Tuileries in Paris. The lumbering two-beat rhythm and extended tuba solo of “Bydlo” depicts an ox-drawn cart.

The exhibition catalogue described the “Ballet of Chicks in Their Shells” as a costume sketch for the play Trilby, produced by the Bolshoi Theater in 1871: “Canary chicks, enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor. Instead of a headdress, canary heads put on like helmets down to the neck.” “Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle” is based upon two portraits owned by Mussorgsky and lent to the exhibition. The string sections depict Goldenberg sumptuously dressed in fur. The nervous trumpet is the poorly-dressed Schmuyle. “The Marketplace in Limoges” shows women in lively conversation in front of the cathedral of Limoges. Hartmann painted himself with a friend in a catacomb looking at a pile of skulls in “Catacombae: Sepulchrum Romanum”, and Mussorgsky himself explained the next movement “Cum mortuis in lingua mortua”: “A Latin text: ‘With the Dead in a Dead Language.’ Well may it be in Latin! The creative spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me to the skulls, calls out to them, and the skulls begin to glow dimly from within.”

“The Hut of Baba-Yaga on Fowl’s Legs” is about the famed Russian witch Baba Yaga, who ground up her captive’s bones and flew through the air on a huge pestle. Hartmann’s drawing is of a clock in the shape of the witch’s hut that stood on four chicken feet. This grotesque movement leads directly into the majestic “Great Gate of Kiev”. Hartmann’s picture was an entry into a competition for a new gate in Kiev commemorating Czar Alexander II’s escape from an assassination attempt. Full of grandeur, this final movement also contains the seeds of the opening promenade.

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