

Pictures at an Exhibition

Modest Musorgsky; arr. Maurice Ravel

Modest Musorgsky committed himself rather late to the profession of music, but he came to it with considerable background. As a child, he had gained enough keyboard skill to perform a piano concerto by John Field when he was only nine. Before he finished preparatory school and embarked on a brief career in the military, he was familiar with a considerable range of mainstream European piano repertoire.

An important strand of 19th-century piano music involved groups of miniatures gathered together into suites. Many of these collections were simply a succession of pieces that were musically unrelated, but in some cases composers went to lengths to integrate their assemblages by recalling musical motifs as the piece progressed. Schumann's *Car-naval* is a famous example of the genre, and Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* takes a place in the same tradition, in its case employing a "Promenade" theme to provide continuity among the disparate movements.

The piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* was inspired by a group of images by Viktor Hartmann, an architect and designer who, beginning in 1870, became one of Musorgsky's closest friends. Musorgsky had dedicated to him the song "In the Corner" from his song cycle *The Nursery* and he welcomed Hartmann's input about his compositions; one result was his heeding of Hartmann's advice to restore the Fountain Scene he had intended to cut from his opera *Boris Godunov*.

Hartmann died in 1873, at the age of 39. In 1874, a memorial exhibit was mounted at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg; it included Hartmann's architectural drawings as well as designs for craft pieces, jewelry, and so on — some 400 works. Among the items on display, according to the critic Vladimir Stasov, were

lively, elegant sketches by a genre-painter, the majority depicting scenes, characters, and figures out of everyday life, captured in the middle of everything going on around them: on streets, and in churches, in Parisian catacombs and Polish monasteries, in Roman alleys and in villages around Limoges.

It is not known when Musorgsky visited the exhibit or when he settled on the concept of creating musical equivalents to a number of the pictures. In 1903 Stasov claimed in a letter that it had actually been *his* idea, and that he had even suggested the topics of the movements, but there is no further evidence to corroborate his claim. Only six of the relevant Hartmann drawings have been ascertained beyond a doubt. Musorgsky's other movements seem to be of specific images that have since strayed, or they may be composites of various pictures. The subjects range from the eeriness of a medieval Italian castle to the liveliness of

IN SHORT

Born: March 21, 1839, in Karevo, in the Pskov district of Russia

Died: March 28, 1881, in St. Petersburg

Work composed: June 1874, as a set of piano pieces; orchestrated by Ravel between May and autumn 1922

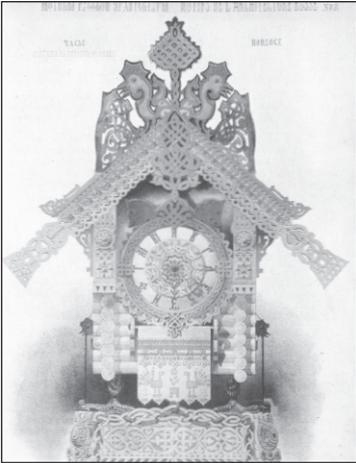
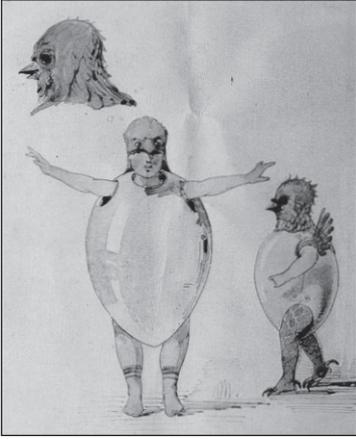
World premiere: Ravel's orchestration, October 19, 1922, at the Paris Opéra, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 13, 1930, Arturo Toscanini, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 26, 2013, Charles Dutoit, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 32 minutes

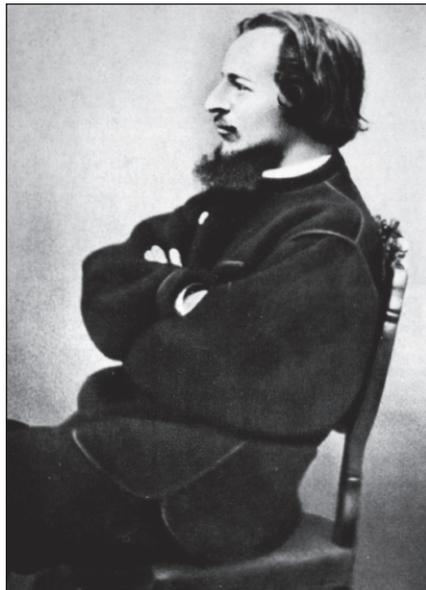
Pictures from the Exhibition



The Viktor Hartmann memorial exhibit that so inspired Musorgsky is known to have included more than 400 works, most of which have been lost over time. Hartmann had been a student at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, where the show was mounted, and he had worked as a book illustrator early on, and also as an architect. Remaining works from the exhibition reflect both those interests in their style and subject matter. They include Hartmann's costume designs from the ballet *Trilby*, or *The Demon of the Heath*, produced by the Bolshoi Theater in 1871, with choreography by Marius Petipa — rendered by Musorgsky as “Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks”; a clock design in the form of a hut on chicken legs, meant to evoke the dwelling of the witch Baba Yaga, from Russian folklore, and reflected by Musorgsky in motives that evoke the tolling of bells; and Hartmann's award-winning design for a city gate in Kiev, commissioned by Tsar Alexander II but never constructed.

— The Editors

From top, Hartmann's costumes for the ballet *Trilby*; his Russian folkloric clock design; and his Kiev gate design; Hartmann in an undated photo



children playing in the Tuileries gardens; they culminate in a diptych of Russian scenes — the macabre witch Baba-Yaga of folk legend and the glowing depiction of the Great Gate at Kiev, an architectural extravaganza designed to honor Tsar Alexander II but never constructed. The recurring “Promenade” theme suggests the viewer strolling from one picture to the next. Musorgsky produced his score in a sprint of inspiration, apparently in the course of about 20 days. The final page of his manuscript is dated June 22, 1874, and on June 27 he signed off on all of the score’s details and inscribed a dedication to Stasov.

Maurice Ravel encountered Musorgsky’s piano suite in a cleaned-up version by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the only edition that was available at the time. He shared his enthusiasm with the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who, ironically, was not familiar with this masterpiece of his Russian compatriot.

Koussevitzky commissioned Ravel to create an orchestral transcription of the suite, reserving exclusive performance rights for himself for some years, during which he conducted it often and ushered it into a niche of honor in the symphonic repertoire. A number of other orchestral versions have been produced over the years, including some that arguably capture a more authentically “Russian” sound, but it is Ravel’s against which all others are measured.

Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets and bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, whip, ratchet, cymbals, bass drum, gong, orchestra bells, xylophone, chime, two harps, celeste, and strings.

Ravel Makes Do

When Maurice Ravel became acquainted with Musorgsky’s piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*, it was through the edition that Rimsky-Korsakov had published under the imprint of the Bessel Publishing Company in 1886, the only edition then in print. Ravel realized that it veered from Musorgsky’s original — to what extent he could not be sure — and he made efforts to lay his hands on something closer to the source. On February 3, 1922, he wrote to his friend M.D. Calvocoressi, a critic who was deeply involved in Russian musical circles:

I was expecting a copy of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, in Musorgsky’s original edition. Now, this minute I received a notice that it cannot be procured. Do you have one, and could you lend it to me for a while? Or do you know anyone who could do me this favor?

Calvocoressi regretted that he was unable to help.

It remained impossible to gain an accurate assessment of how much alteration Rimsky-Korsakov had effected until 1975, when the Soviet Union allowed a facsimile of Musorgsky’s manuscript to be published. It became apparent that Rimsky-Korsakov’s emendations were relatively minor, and that if Ravel had been successful in his quest for a “purer” edition, the musical text wouldn’t have been much different from what he already had.

Musorgsky, in an 1881 portrait by Ilya Repin

