



Modest Mussorgsky

“Pictures at an Exhibition”
(orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)

MODEST PETROVICH MUSSORGSKY was born at Karevo, District of Pskov, on March 21, 1839, and died in St. Petersburg on March 28, 1881. He composed “Pictures at an Exhibition” as a set of piano pieces in June 1874. MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937) made his orchestral transcription in the summer of 1922 for Serge Koussevitzky, who two years later would begin his twenty-five-year tenure as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Koussevitzky introduced the Ravel version at one of his own concerts in Paris on October 22, 1922, and led the American premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra early in his first Boston season, on November 7 and 8, 1924, in Symphony Hall.

RAVEL’S ORCHESTRATION OF “PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION” calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, bells, triangle, tam-tam, rattle, whip, cymbals, side drum, bass drum, xylophone, celesta, two harps, and strings.



It was Ravel, the Frenchman, who told Serge Koussevitzky, the Russian, about these fascinating pieces and fired his enthusiasm. At the time, around 1922, the *Pictures at an Exhibition* were quite unknown, and the Russian publishing house of Bessel, which had issued them in 1886 in a version heavily edited by Rimsky-Korsakov, had so little faith in them that it had no difficulty going along with Koussevitzky’s stipulation that Ravel’s transcription should be reserved for a number of years for his exclusive use, since clearly there was nothing in it for the publishers. In the event, the Mussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures* quickly became a Koussevitzky specialty, and his frequent and brilliant performances, especially his fantastic 1930 recording with the Boston Symphony, turned the work into an indispensable repertory item. What would particularly have pleased Ravel is the way the popularity of “his” *Pictures* led pianists to rediscover Mussorgsky’s.

At that, Ravel was not the first musician to orchestrate *Pictures at an Exhibition*, having been anticipated by Mikhail Tushmalov in 1891 (his version also being tampered with by



Fifth Programme

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, NOVEMBER 7, at 2.30 o'clock

SATURDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 8, at 8.15 o'clock

Beethoven Overture to Goethe's "Egmont," Op. 84

Mozart Symphony in G minor (Koechel No. 550)

- I. Allegro molto
- II. Andante
- III. Menuetto: Trio
- IV. Finale: Allegro assai

Debussy Two Nocturnes

- I. Nuages.
 - II. Fêtes.
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Moussorgsky . . . Pictures at an Exhibition (arranged for Orchestra
by M. Ravel)
(First time in America)

Promenade—Gnomus—Il Vecchio Castello—Tuileries—Bydlo—Ballet
des Poussins dans leur Coques—Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle—Catacombs
(Con mortuis in lingua mortua)—La Cabane sur des Pattes de Poule—
La Grande Porte de Kiev.

There will be an intermission of ten minutes after Debussy's Nocturnes

City of Boston, Revised Regulation of August 5, 1898.—Chapter 3, relating to the covering of
the head in places of public amusement

Every licensee shall not, in his place of amusement, allow any person to wear upon the head a covering which obstructs
the view of the exhibition or performance in such place of any person seated in any seat thereto provided for spectators,
it being understood that a low head covering without projection, which does not obstruct such view, may be worn.
Attest: J. M. GALVIN, City Clerk.

The works to be played at these concerts may be seen in the Allen A. Brown Music Collection
of the Boston Public Library one week before the concert

Rimsky-Korsakov, who conducted the first performance) and by Sir Henry J. Wood in 1920. During the time that Ravel's score was available only to Koussevitzky, an orchestration appeared by Leonidas Leonardi ("whose idea of the art," remarked a contemporary critic, "is very remote"), and later there were scorings by Leopold Stokowski, Lucien Cailliet (the uncredited ghostwriter of many orchestrations attributed to Stokowski, though the *Pictures* do seem to be Stokowski's own), and Walter Goehr—not to forget the electronic version by Tomita, Elgar Howarth's transcription for the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, the Yamashita reduction for solo guitar, Keith Emerson's rock presentation, and Vladimir Horowitz's own rethinking for piano.

In this whole scene, Ravel's edition is the time-tested survivor, and for good reason: he is Mussorgsky's peer, and his transcription stands as a model of what we would ask for in such an enterprise by way of technical brilliance, imaginative insight, and concern for Mussorgsky's own name.

The *Pictures* are "really" Victor Hartmann's. He was a close and important friend to Mussorgsky, and his death at only thirty-nine in the summer of 1873 was an occasion of profound and tearing grief for the composer. The critic Stasov organized a posthumous exhibition of Hartmann's drawings, paintings, and architectural sketches in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1874, and by June 22, Mussorgsky, having worked at high intensity and speed, completed his tribute to his friend. He imagined himself "roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attract-





Chick costume for the ballet "Trilby"

ed his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend." The roving music, which opens the suite, he calls "**Promenade**," and his designation of it as being "nel modo russo" is a redundancy.

Gnomus: According to Stasov, "a child's plaything, fashioned, after Hartmann's design in wood, for the Christmas tree at the Artists' Club... It is something in the style of the fabled Nutcracker, the nuts being inserted into the gnome's mouth. The gnome accompanies his droll movements with savage shrieks."

Il vecchio castello (The Old Castle): There was no item by that title in the exhibition, but it presumably refers to one of several architectural watercolors done on a trip of Hartmann's to Italy. Stasov tells us that the piece represents a medieval castle with a troubadour standing before it. Ravel decided basically to make his orchestra the size of the one Rimsky-Korsakov used in his edition of his opera *Boris Godunov*, the most famous of earlier orchestrations of Mussorgsky, but not, alas, as honorable as Ravel's. He went beyond those bounds in adding percussion and, most remarkably, in his inspired use of the alto saxophone here. In this movement, Ravel makes one of his rare compositional changes, adding an extra measure of accompaniment between the first two phrases of the melody.

Tuileries: The park in Paris, swarming with children and their nurses. Mussorgsky reaches this picture by way of a Promenade.

Bydło: The word is Polish for cattle. Mussorgsky explained to Stasov that the picture represents an ox-drawn wagon with enormous wheels, but adding that "the wagon is not inscribed on the music; that is purely between us."

Ballet of Chicks in their Shells: A costume design for a ballet, *Trilby*, with choreography by Petipa and music by Gerber, and given in St. Petersburg in 1871 (no connection with





Hartmann's "Great Gate of Kiev"

George du Maurier's famous novel, which was not published until 1893). A scene with child dancers was de rigueur in a Petipa spectacular. Here we have canaries "enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor, with canary heads put on like helmets." (See picture on page 49.) The ballet is preceded by a short Promenade.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuÿle: Mussorgsky owned two drawings by Hartmann entitled "A rich Jew wearing a fur hat" and "A poor Jew: Sandomierz." Hartmann had spent a month of 1868 at Sandomierz in Poland. Mussorgsky's manuscript has no title, and Stasov provided one, "Two Polish Jews, one rich, one poor," and he seems later to have added the names of Goldenberg and Schmuÿle. Another small alteration here: Mussorgsky ends with a long note, but Ravel has his Goldenberg dismiss the whining Schmuÿle more abruptly.

The Market at Limoges: Mussorgsky jots some imagined conversation in the margin of the manuscript: "Great news! M. de Puissanceout has just recovered his cow... Mme. de Remboursac has just acquired a beautiful new set of teeth, while M. de Pantaleon's nose, which is in his way, is as much as ever the color of a peony." With a great rush of wind, Mussorgsky plunges us directly into the

Catacombæ. Sepulcrum Romanum: The picture shows the interior of catacombs in Paris with Hartmann, a friend, and a guide with a lamp. Mussorgsky adds this marginal note: "The creative spirit of the dead Hartmann leads me towards skulls, apostrophizes them—the skulls are illuminated gently from within."

Con mortuis in lingua mortua (Among the dead in the language of the dead): A ghostly transformation of the Promenade, to be played "con lamento."



The Hut on Chicken Legs: A clock in 14th-century style, in the shape of a hut with cock's heads and on chicken legs, done in metal. Mussorgsky associated this with the witch Baba-Yaga, who flew about in a mortar in chase of her victims.

The Great Gate of Kiev (see picture on page XX): A design for a series of stone gates that were to have replaced the wooden city gates, "to commemorate the event of April 4, 1886." The "event" was the escape of Tsar Alexander II from assassination. The gates were never built, and Mussorgsky's majestic vision seems quite removed from Hartmann's plan for a structure decorated with tinted brick, with the Imperial eagle on top, and, to one side, a three-story belfry with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic helmet.

Michael Steinberg

MICHAEL STEINBERG was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1976 to 1979, and after that of the San Francisco Symphony and New York Philharmonic. Oxford University Press has published three compilations of his program notes, devoted to symphonies, concertos, and the great works for chorus and orchestra.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of "Pictures at an Exhibition" were the American premiere performances of Ravel's orchestration, given by Serge Koussevitzky on November 7 and 8, 1924. Ravel's orchestration was programmed frequently by Koussevitzky during his years with the BSO, that version also being performed in BSO concerts under the direction of Richard Burgin, Eleazar de Carvalho, Guido Cantelli, Igor Markevitch, Ernest Ansermet, Seiji Ozawa, Thomas Schippers, Carlo Maria Giulini, Kazuyoshi Akiyama, Eugene Ormandy, James Conlon, Eri Klas, Ilan Volkov, David Zinman, Charles Dutoit, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, Peter Oundjian, James Levine, Marcelo Lehninger (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on July 27, 2012), and Leonidas Kavakos (the most recent subscription series, in November 2014). In April 2013, Oliver Knussen led BSO subscription performances of "Pictures at an Exhibition" in a "symphonic transcription" by Leopold Stokowski. The BSO has also played Mussorgsky's "Pictures" under Leonard Slatkin in a version with the individual "pictures" variously orchestrated by Lawrence Leonard, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Lucien Cailliet, Sergei Gorchakov, Leonidas Leonardi, Sir Henry Wood, M. Tushmalov, Stokowski, and Ravel; and under Kurt Masur on several occasions in the complete orchestration by Sergei Gorchakov.

