

Russia's Greatest Hits

SCHERMERHORN SYMPHONY CENTER

LAURA TURNER CONCERT HALL

September 17, 2009, at 7 p.m.

September 18 & 19, 2009, at 8 p.m.

Nashville Symphony

Giancarlo Guerrero, *conductor*

Stephen Hough, *piano*

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

Russian Easter Overture, Op. 36

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 23

Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso

Andantino semplice

Allegro con fuoco

Stephen Hough, *piano*

intermission

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

orch. Maurice Ravel

Pictures at an Exhibition

Promenade [I]

Gnomus

Promenade [II]

Il vecchio castello [The Old Castle]

Promenade [III]

Tuileries

Bydło

Promenade [IV]

Ballet of Chicks in Their Shells

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle [Two Polish Jews]

The Marketplace at Limoges

Catacombs

Cum mortuis in lingua mortua

Baba-Yaga [The Hut on Hen's Legs]

The Great Gate of Kiev

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

born on March 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, Russia; died on June 21, 1908, in Lyubensk, Russia

Russian Easter Overture, Op. 36

Rimsky-Korsakov composed the Russian Easter Overture between August 1887 and April 1888 and dedicated it to the memory of Modest Mussorgsky and Alexander Borodin. He conducted the premiere in St. Petersburg on December 15, 1888.

The Overture is scored for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bells, bass drum, tam-tam, harp and strings.

estimated length: 15 minutes

Rimsky-Korsakov, along with Modest Mussorgsky, belonged to a group of Russian composers who had banded together in St. Petersburg with the aim of cultivating a self-reliant and authentically Russian art. They became known as “The Five” or “The Mighty Handful,” with Rimsky-Korsakov as the young pup of the bunch. As a self-taught composer, Rimsky-Korsakov absorbed the anti-academic bias of The Five, but, ironically, he went on to wield significant influence as a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He developed expertise in Russian folk culture and above all in the art of richly characterful orchestration, much of this gleaned from his duties as “inspector of naval bands” while an officer in the navy. His long decade of teaching left a lasting imprint on the emerging composers of a new generation, including Stravinsky.

Through most of the 1880s, Rimsky-Korsakov’s own muse had been fallow, but he broke the long dry spell with two works that have remained his most popular in the concert hall: *Scheherazade* and the *Russian Easter Overture*, both of which he completed in 1888. Soon after, Rimsky-Korsakov became preoccupied with composing opera, but the *Russian Easter Overture* is an independent, self-contained work for the concert hall rather than an opera overture — something akin to a symphonic poem, comparable in that sense to Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture*.

The piece weaves together two key aspects of Rimsky-Korsakov’s musical thought: his affection for Russian source material and his perfection of a vibrant, shimmering sound world through orchestral coloration. The subject of the Overture is the Easter feast day as experienced in Russian Orthodox culture, where it is not only the holiest holiday of the liturgical year but an occasion for widespread celebration. The piece’s title in Russian is in fact the phrase traditionally used for Easter: “Bright Holiday.”

Rimsky-Korsakov himself was not an Orthodox believer. But his fascination with Russian ritual led him to become intrigued by, as he put it, the “transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled rejoicing of Easter Sunday” — the latter evoking for him images of “pagan merry-making.” Rimsky-Korsakov also plays a bit like the cultural anthropologist by employing a number of melodies gleaned from his studies of Russian Orthodox liturgy.

The Overture’s basic narrative shape — adapting the familiar structure of a slow introduction and a fast-paced main section — embraces a maximal contrast of moods and instrumental hues. With its procession of woodwinds (playing one of those liturgical melodies) and ravishing solos for violin and cello, the introduction is solemn and meditative. Listen especially to how Rimsky-Korsakov uses delicately rhapsodic colors during the transition from this introduction to the Allegro to depict “the ineffable light in which the Holy Sepulcher had been bathed at the moment of resurrection.”

The Overture continues with a dramatic parade and back-and-forth of more liturgical themes, slowing again for a recitation of prayers from a priestly solo trombone. After a solo flight from the violin, the orchestration brightens with even greater excitement — at first restrained but soon spilling forth into the “unbridled rejoicing” Rimsky-Korsakov was determined to capture in music. The full ensemble, reinforced by brass and pealing bells, exults in the festive spirit.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

born on May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia

died on November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg

Concerto for Piano No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Tchaikovsky composed the first draft of his Concerto for Piano No. 1 between November and December 1874 while living in St. Petersburg and finished orchestrating it a few months later. The first performance took place in Boston on October 25, 1875, with Hans von Bülow as soloist. Tchaikovsky subsequently made minor revisions to the work (we hear the final revision made in 1889).

In addition to the solo piano, the Concerto is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings.

estimated length: 33 minutes

How it must have hurt when Eduard Hanslick, one of the preeminent music critics of the era, denounced Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto as a piece that forces us "to see a host of gross and savage faces, hear crude curses and smell the booze." But imagine the composer's feelings when one of his own staunchest champions, the conductor and pianist Nikolai Rubinstein, pronounced his First Piano Concerto "so badly written as to be beyond rescue."

Christmas Eve 1874 was not a happy one for the young composer. That's when he had arranged to give a play-through of his ambitious new piano concerto, which was still in progress. The stakes were high: Tchaikovsky had been winning advocates but still needed a decisive breakthrough to establish himself. Since he wasn't a professional pianist, he hoped to solicit technical advice from Rubinstein, a celebrated keyboard performer of the time. An eager Tchaikovsky even imagined that Rubinstein might give his piece extra cachet by premiering it himself.

The idea, of course, was that Rubinstein would be impressed by the genius of it all and demand to be the one to play it first. But let's let Tchaikovsky tell the story (as he does in a letter several years after the fact): "I played the first movement. Not a single word, not a single comment! If you knew how stupid and intolerable the situation of a man is who cooks and sets a meal before a friend, a meal the friend then proceeds to eat — in silence!... I summoned all my patience and played through to the end. Still silence. I stood up and asked, 'Well?' "

Rubinstein then launched into a vitriolic denunciation of the concerto. From the gist of it, Tchaikovsky notes, "an independent witness in the room might have concluded that I was a maniac, an untalented, senseless hack who had come to submit his rubbish to an eminent musician." Rubinstein tried to soften the blow by suggesting the piece might work with massive rewrites, to which Tchaikovsky erupted, "*I shall not alter a single note; I shall publish the work exactly as it stands!*"

In fact, Tchaikovsky *did* later publish a revised version, though only with some minor tweakings. But in the meantime, Hans von Bülow emerged as a champion of the concerto. Famous as a conductor and exponent of Wagner, Bülow was also an extraordinary pianist and had expressed admiration for Tchaikovsky's music. He found the concerto not only to overflow with original ideas, but also to be expressed in a clear and mature form. Bülow agreed to premiere the concerto as soloist, which he did on his American tour on October 25, 1875, at a safe remove from Moscow — in Boston, in fact, with a pickup orchestra consisting mostly of Harvard music students (the Boston Symphony was yet to be founded).

It should come as no surprise that Tchaikovsky vehemently rubbed Rubinstein's name off the title page as the dedicatee and replaced it with Bülow's. Although he wasn't present for the world premiere in Boston, Tchaikovsky soon heard of its triumph. Further vindication arrived when Rubinstein later recanted his criticism and actually conducted the Moscow premiere in December 1875. Rubinstein also played as soloist in later years and entrusted the work to a lineage of pianists who were his students, helping to ensure its enduring place in the repertory.

The opening is one of the most famous moments in Tchaikovsky — and in all romantic music. A simple, four-note motif from the horns demands attention. Its insistent repetitions set the scene for the dramatic and passionate melody that then unfolds in the strings. Even if the hammer-chord gestures with which the pianist frames the tune have been endlessly parodied

by Liberace stylings, this curtain raiser retains its ability to stir up a sense of excitement and grandeur. Enjoy it while you can the tune returns only once in this lengthy introduction and then is gone for good.

Brass chords form a bridge into the main movement proper. Tchaikovsky speeds up the tempo and sends the soloist skittering across the keyboard in an agitated rhythm. This also returns us to the concerto's gloomy home key of B-flat minor after the velvety D-flat major of the grand tune in the introduction. In contrast to the latter, Tchaikovsky gets a good deal of mileage out of the pensive theme first heard from the clarinet. This happens to be one of several imports from folk music use in the concerto. In this case, the source is a Ukrainian tune Tchaikovsky claims he had heard whistled at the market fair by blind beggars. The richly episodic first movement mixes quieter musings with brashly dramatic outbursts. The soloist's finger-stretching virtuosity, from delicate, gracious figurations to thunderous double-octaves, is at the service of Tchaikovsky's far-ranging emotional spectrum — all of which is on display in microcosm in the fantasia-like cadenza, whose lengthy dimensions make this section resemble a play within a play.

The Andantino (a little quicker than a leisurely Andante) merges the respite of a lyrical slow movement with the playful touch of a scherzo. Revel in Tchaikovsky's gorgeous, intimate orchestration, particularly the piano's duets with flute and other solo instruments. It all makes for a striking contrast with the epic sprawl of the first movement. The scherzo parts, which play with French folk song as their musical material, intrude surrealistically — almost in a parody of a waltz.

Folk music — again, Ukrainian in overall character if not as literal quotation — also fuels the fiery finale, with an intriguingly accented main theme that seems tailor-made for the keyboard. Something of the jittery attitude from the opening movement proper finds its way into this music, while a contrasting second theme is tenderly songful and more metrically regular. At the finale's climax, this theme gets the same neon-light treatment we recall from the concerto's opening gestures before the music speeds up for a final, manic thunderclap of head-spinning virtuosity.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

born on March 21, 1839 in Karevo, Russia

died on March 26, 1881 in St. Petersburg

Pictures at an Exhibition (orch. Ravel)

Mussorgsky composed *Pictures at an Exhibition* during a brief period in June 1874, inspired by a recent retrospective of the works of his artist friend, Viktor Hartmann. He wrote the piece for solo piano, but dozens of composers since have tried their hand at translating it for full orchestra. The most successful orchestration remains the version Ravel prepared in 1922. Serge Koussevitzky conducted the Mussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures* in Paris on October 19, 1922.

Ravel's score calls for 2 piccolos, 3 flutes, 3 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, ratchet, slapstick, triangle, tam-tam, xylophone, glockenspiel, chimes, celesta, 2 harps and strings.

estimated length: 30 minutes

In the summer of 1873, Mussorgsky — who himself would die at a relatively young age as a result of alcoholism — suffered the premature death of the artist Viktor Hartmann (1834-1873), a close friend. Hartmann was one of those rare souls with whom the lonely composer seemed able to express shared artistic aspirations. His art was multifaceted and ranged from painting to costume design to architecture. The composer was profoundly affected by his loss.

A retrospective exhibit of Hartmann's career the following year inspired Mussorgsky to translate his reactions into his own art. He wrote an unusual piano suite made of relatively short but interlocking vignettes. Mussorgsky performed the music for

friends at private gatherings, but it remained unpublished until after his death. Rimsky-Korsakov in turn posthumously commemorated his friend Mussorgsky by selecting and editing his chaos of manuscripts, but nearly a half-century passed from the creation of *Pictures at an Exhibition* until Maurice Ravel fashioned the orchestral suite that quickly became one of the best known works of the classical repertoire.

It's fascinating to listen to the original work for piano and then to compare it to Ravel's treatment, which exploits a wide-ranging palette and many striking contrasts of sonority. In a sense, Mussorgsky's "translation" of his friend's art has its analogue here: Ravel further translates from the piano keyboard to the full eloquence of the orchestra. Yet neither version cancels out the other; both simply add to the richness of the work. With his legendary finesse, Ravel in fact furthers the "conversation" that Mussorgsky has opened up in reflecting on the art of his friend. The shimmering, precise effects Ravel commands are, in turn, often compared with those of a painter — bringing us full circle again.

An intensely visual person, Mussorgsky was interested in connections between the arts — not so much in Wagner's sense of a synthesis, but rather through mutual explorations of similar themes. The Hartmann retrospective included watercolors, oil paintings, costume designs, architectural sketches and the like, and ranged from Russia to France and medieval Italy — thus a motley collection of objects covered in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. In fact, several pieces of the original artwork have since been lost, so that Mussorgsky's portraits remain our sole "record."

Pictures begins with a bright, confident theme (**Promenade**). Given to trumpets and then full brass by Ravel, this theme recurs periodically to signal the spectator strolling through the exhibition. Mussorgsky sets this confident, folk-like theme in shifting meters to suggest the spectator's uneven step — apparently a "self-portrait" of the heavy-set composer lumbering among the exhibit pieces.

Gnomus takes its cue from Hartmann's drawing for a deformed gnome likely meant as a design for a nutcracker. Mussorgsky ingeniously emphasizes its halting limp with erratic, irregular rhythms and muffled chords. The Promenade returns in a more chorale-like idiom to lead us to **The Old Castle**, which is based on one of Hartmann's architectural watercolors of an Italian castle. Its lilting meter has the nostalgic feel of an old ballad; Ravel's ingenious touch is to give the voice of a "singing troubadour" in the watercolor to a plaintive alto sax.

A briefer but more stately reprise of the Promenade now takes us to Paris and the decorous setting of the **Tuileries** garden where children have been playing but now engage in a spat. Immediately afterward Mussorgsky depicts a big-wheeled oxcart (**Bydło** — Polish for "cattle") with a heavy, march-like tread in the bass. Ravel magnifies the effect via a solo tuba.

As the Promenade grows more wistful, it introduces a highly varied mini-suite: **Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells** (from Hartmann's costume designs) is a scherzo-like, coloristic vignette. Its quirky, mechanical pulsings make a perfect match for Ravel's orchestral art, which tends to every detail — accent, grace note, chord spacing — with engaging colorism. In **Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle**, Mussorgsky conflates what were two separate pictures by Hartmann into characterizations sharply contrasted by pitch and rhythmic profile. Ravel emphasizes these contrasts: the self-important, wandering line in lower strings for the rich Goldenberg is set against an insistent chatter high in the trumpet (the beggar Schmuyle). At the end the two are combined. A brisk pick-up in pace announces **The Marketplace at Limoges**, a comical episode in which townsfolk gossip and — in a brief climax — argue over wares.

At this point, *Pictures* undergoes a dramatic shift in tone. The playful chaos of the marketplace spills over into imposing, sepulchral chords deep in the brass that lead us underground. **Catacombs** — so-called for an image of the ancient catacombs of Paris — introduces the theme of death, reminding us that Mussorgsky's initial impulse was to create a musical memorial for his friend. Deeply moving harmonies resound with an organ-like majesty in Ravel's orchestration. Mussorgsky underlines the centrality of this episode with his next variant on the Promenade — a minor-key version against ghostly strings called **Cum mortuis in lingua mortua** ("with those who have died in the language of the dead"). A ray of consoling hope seems to shine in the final measures as the texture brightens briefly.

The next image brutally intrudes. **The Hut on Hen's Legs**, based on Hartmann's design for a clock, alludes to a grotesque figure from Russian folklore — the witch Baba-Yaga, who grinds down the bones of her victims. The music abounds with harsh percussive effects and unsettling harmonies.

Pictures concludes with a triumphant expansion of the Promenade theme, for which Ravel pulls out all the stops, including pealing bells and a festive array of percussion. The celebratory tone pays homage to Hartmann's architectural design for **The Great Gate of Kiev** — which was never built. Here the spectator and the artwork merge thematically, just as Mussorgsky's so majestic image firms up his monument to his friend.

Thomas May is program annotator for the Nashville Symphony and writes regularly about music and theater. His books include Decoding Wagner and The John Adams Reader.