Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition, orchestrated by Maurice Ravel


It was Ravel, the Frenchman, who told Koussevitzky, the Russian, about these fascinating pieces and fired his enthusiasm. The Pictures were quite unknown then, and Mussorgsky’s publisher, Bessel, had so little faith in them that they stipulated that Ravel’s transcription be for Koussevitzky’s personal use only since there was clearly nothing in it for them. 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 that the popularity of “his” Pictures at an Exhibition led pianists to rediscover Mussorgsky’s. In transcribing the Pictures Ravel had been anticipated by M. Tushmalov as early as 1891 and by Sir Henry J. Wood in 1920, and then there were, during the period Ravel’s version was available only to Koussevitzky, Leonidas Leonardi (“whose idea of the art,” remarked a contemporary critic, “is very remote”), Lucien Cailliet, and Leopold Stokowski—not to forget the electronic version by Tomita, the rock one of Emerson, Lake & Palmer, or the more recent orchestral version by Vladimir Ashkenazy.* Ravel’s edition is the time-tested survivor, and for good reason: his is Mussorgsky’s peer, and his transcription stands as the model of what we would ask in probity, technical brilliance, fantasy, imaginative insight, and concern for the name linked with his own.

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 attracted 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 russico” 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.

Bydlo: 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 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.” The ballet is preceded by a short Promenade.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: 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 Schmuyle. Another small alteration here: Mussorgsky ends with a long note, but Ravel has his Goldenberg dismiss the whining Schmuyle more abruptly.

The Market at Limoges: Mussorgsky jots some imagined conversation in the margin of the manuscript: “Great news! M. de Puissangeout 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 Catacombs. 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: A design for a series of stone gates that were to have replaced the wooden city gates, “to commemorate the event of April 4, 1866.” 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.