

Mussorgsky – Pictures at an Exhibition

This great masterpiece is derived from the spirit of Russian Nationalism, - *the good kind, possessed by a freedom of spirit and thought, and governed by good intentions*. From time to time – like minded artists might take a step back from their condition to appraise their position in history and in a national legacy. The general Russian psyche has always been concerned with a national legacy and – if possible – a demonstrable way to assert what was considered to be superior or worthy of note. This is not true of just the Russian sphere, - all nations do it to a great extent, and the jingoistic fervor that accompanies it drives all our man made conflicts. But with the truest intentions, let us suppose that Russian artists of all kinds- architects, fine artists, composers and writers between 1850 and 1895 were drawn to establishing a style that was uniquely Russian. One that would proclaim a national identity and one that would proclaim a natural dominance. This completely describes the conditions on the ground when Victor Hartmann was creating his masterly designs. Not only was Victor Hartmann an extremely talented artist he was one of the first to incorporate Russian motifs into his architectural designs. He was also a contemporary of the ‘Mighty Five’ – or ‘*Moguchaya kuchka*’ of which group much has been written about the way they molded artistic thought and creation. Led by Mily Balakirev, the group also consisted of César Cui, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin and of course, Modest Mussorgsky. All of these composers of the new Russian Revival based in St. Petersburg, considered themselves to be the only ticket to artistic achievement, on occasion bumping heads with Muscovites, like Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky. Victor Hartmann had been introduced to the ‘Mighty Five’, specifically Mussorgsky in 1870 by none other than the well placed Vladimir Stasov, the preeminent critic and tyrannical maker and breaker of artistic careers. Hartmann’s ideology was completely aligned with that of the musicians – and a lasting bond would surely have formed. The untimely death of Hartmann, in 1873 from an aneurism at the age of 39, shocked everyone and many mourned a man whom they considered to be at the forefront of the great Russian revival. In February and March 1874 an exhibition of Hartmann’s work was mounted by the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. It was a grand showing with over 400 works that was intended to go beyond a memorial to Hartmann. It was a grand proclamation of Russian heritage and an even grander proclamation of the artistic supremacy of the St. Petersburg clique. The effect was not lost on Mussorgsky, who set about composing his piece entitled “Pictures at an Exhibition”. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the 400 designs and drawings displayed in the 1874 exhibit are lost to us. However, a few remain which appear printed with this article.

Without exception, the individual impulses that led Hartmann to create his work all tell a fascinating story. For example, the *Hut on Fowl’s Legs*, from the terrifying children’s fairytale of ‘Baba Yaga’, is a topic that remained conjured in Hartmann’s mind for a while. Stasov related an incident where both he and Hartmann had been invited to a fancy dress ball and Hartmann

had shocked all the attendees by coming dressed as 'Baba Yaga'. The *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*, is based on Hartmann's costume designs for a ballet 'Trilby' composed by Gerber and choreographed by Petipa. Young children of the Russian Imperial Ballet School appeared as various animals, including these chicks still trying to escape their egg shell exterior. Hartmann had spent a month in Poland sketching and painting in the environs of the town of Sandomir. The two drawings representing the Rich and the Poor Jew – are from that period. *The Catacombs* are sketched as a result of the three years Hartmann spent in Paris. It was part of a four year stint allowed abroad at government expense – a perk for graduating with honours. *Tuileries* and *Limoges* are from the same set. *The Great Gate at Kiev* has an equally storied background. The assassination attempt against Tsar Alexander II occurred in April, 1866 in Kiev. As odd as it seems, the narrow miss was justification to start on a project to memorialize the event, for which Hartmann submitted this design for one of the gates of the city.. The objection to the oddity of commemorating a near miss on the life of the sovereign won through, and the plans for the project were scrapped. Hartmann considered the design to be one of his best, displaying all the aspects of the Russian Revival, and was disappointed to not see his idea through to fruition.

The Transcriptions: Tushmalev, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov, transcribed parts of the original piano work as early as 1891. Next came the transcription of the great British conductor Henry Wood. Wood withdrew his transcription in deference to Ravel's when it appeared in 1922 as a result of Koussevitsky's commission. There was another Finnish composer, Leo Funtek who actually was the first to transcribe the whole work for orchestra– and as we know Ravel's version– despite being a masterly display of sonorities, - rewrites and remolds the piece to suit the moment. The young Ravel had witnessed the great World Exposition of Paris in 1889, where attractions had included the Eiffel Tower, The Imperial Diamond and Buffalo Bill. He had been drawn to and greatly impressed by the Russian works conducted there by Rimsky-Korsakov. As the impressions of youth are lasting and consequential it is no wonder that when Ravel revisited Mussorgsky's 'Pictures' that we would have the resulting triumph. So triumphant that all the subsequent versions, for piano or orchestra, and there are several, return to Ravel as the source material, not the original Mussorgsky.

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