

## **RUSSIAN NATIONALISM: Two very different sides to the same coin**

It is always a paradox to write *about* music. One feels cautious at best, and ill-equipped at worst, in describing what can only be a personal perception. This is made more difficult, if not a little unwise, in the fact that writers will attempt to transfer medium from the sonically heard to the written word, and somehow suggest that *one* can capture the essence of the *other*. Therefore, the qualifiers must always be present to explain that the rich reward of all music is primarily in the gut reaction to its listening. Having conceded that point, it is normally my process to provide something beyond the fraught elements of a simple musical analysis and by so doing make the reader's musical experience a richer and more pleasurable one. I am delighted to be afforded this opportunity once more, by the editors of **ON STAGE**. As many readers will recognize, it represents an ongoing mission on behalf of the NCPA to encourage the appreciation of our western music treasures. The forthcoming season with the Symphony Orchestra of India will include two seminal Russian works - **Modest Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition'** in its masterly transcription by *Maurice Ravel* and **Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5**. Both of them are heavy displays of Russian Nationalism and, indeed are a byproduct of it – but in two completely different eras, governed by two completely different and opposite psychologies.

### **Mussorgsky – Pictures at an Exhibition**

This colossal warhorse is completely 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.

### **Shostakovich- Symphony No. 5**

This colossal warhorse is also completely derived from the spirit of Russian Nationalism – *the bad kind, possessed by the need to control and dominate and conjured from the oppression of dictatorial government*. Dmitri Shostakovich stands as one of the greatest Russian composers of any generation, and yet, his life is marked with the unfair rollercoaster of unqualified criticism. In fact, in this case, the unqualified criticism carried with it the possibility of harsh punishment, national disgrace and potential fatality for the individual, their friends or their family. History shows us that time and again, it's the kind of criticism that one expects from tyrannical forces that feel the end to their dominance might be near. It is marked by extra privation and completely illogical action.

By 1925 with his First Symphony it was clear that the grand arc of a great career was in ascendancy. Here was extraordinary music, extraordinary orchestration, and funnily enough music that was meeting a set of socially instructed artistic confines that had already started to be imposed. All of his works up to and including the opera Lady Macbeth of Mtensk were heralded as genius, and the opera was so successful after its Leningrad debut in January 1934 that it played in Europe and in London and by the time May 1936 came around it was being performed in three theatres in Moscow simultaneously. All was well with the world, and in fact advised by a friend to attend, Shostakovich was present at the January 26<sup>th</sup> performance of the opera which was attended by Stalin and the entire Politburo. Given the political and popular success of the piece already, I'm sure he would have been expecting to be introduced in a moment of triumph. What happened next is infamous and appalling, but very consequential. Stalin grimaced through the entire performance, egged on by sycophants and laughing out loud in the love scenes. Two days later the Pravda article 'Muddle not Music' appeared condemning the piece and containing the veiled threat "this is playing with nonsensical things, which could end very badly". Shostakovich was not naïve to what this meant. The terrifying pogroms of 1936-1937 had started and his sister Mariya would be soon be sent to Siberia. In addition close

friends and colleagues, Marshal Tukhachevsky, Nikolai Zhilyayev, Boris Kornilov and Adrian Piotrovsky were all ordered executed by Stalin, - all dead by May 1937. The Opera went on hold, the Fourth symphony went on hold, and more terrifying, Shostakovich's life went on hold. He talks of the despair of nights spent on the landing outside his front door, so that his family would not be awoken when the Secret Police came to take him away. Of this possibility he was sure and he lived in complete fear. Lady Macbeth and the Fourth Symphony didn't see the light again until the 1960's, when a benign Nikita Krushchev looked on unable to stop the international acclaim Shostakovich had finally achieved.

However, in 1937 Shostakovich had to purposefully and publically redeem himself, and be seen to be redeeming himself if he were to survive. The Fifth Symphony is entitled, "An artist's response to just criticism" – and with populist, easy melodies and fanfares that drive the blood, he deliberately appeals to the *lowest common denominator* in music appreciation. He succeeds, somewhat tongue-in-cheek to rehabilitate himself, at the same time deliciously implicating the puerility of the political critics. This is not to say the work doesn't have extraordinary musical merit. It does – however, it is not the real Shostakovich. It is the remolded, skeptic, fearful, compliant artist, who realizes that his real force would have to be controlled and manifested *sotto voce*. How do we know this to be fact? If one wants to know the real Shostakovich, look to the fifteen quartets, not to the symphonies. The first quartet also comes from the Lady Macbeth period, and in fact quotes generously from it and other snippets from that early unadulterated style. He doesn't write another quartet until 1946 and then it is always in the quartets that the real, full, emotional, private and didactic musician is completely demonstrable. Fifteen symphonies and fifteen quartets later one can assess the true emotional ride by looking at history. Shostakovich wasn't observing this history as a bystander, he was in it, experiencing it, governed by it, fearing it and greatly pained by it. The quartets and later symphonies allow a release of the stored emotion by way of musical commentary.

The seesaw was not over. Following his rehabilitation with the triumphant reception of the fifth symphony war broke out with the Finnish people in 1939. Despite commissions for stirring militaristic works, the Red army suffered huge defeat. The commissions had come from none other than Andrei Zhdanov – the party leader in Leningrad - however, all were too embarrassed to use the resulting '*Suite on Finnish Themes*'. 1941 brought the war with Germany and the depth of human loss in the Leningrad campaign. Despite the seventh symphony's proclamation of victory, the similarity of it to the fifth and the effects of the 'Stalingrad' symphony No. 8 – Zhdanov's denunciation of Shostakovich, along with Prokofiev and Khachaturian went on without mercy in 1948. The grip of this tyrannical and barbaric oppression of art relaxed just a bit with Stalin's death in 1953. It is a mild shock to the senses, that in recent months the conditions of the former Soviet Union have been held up as an

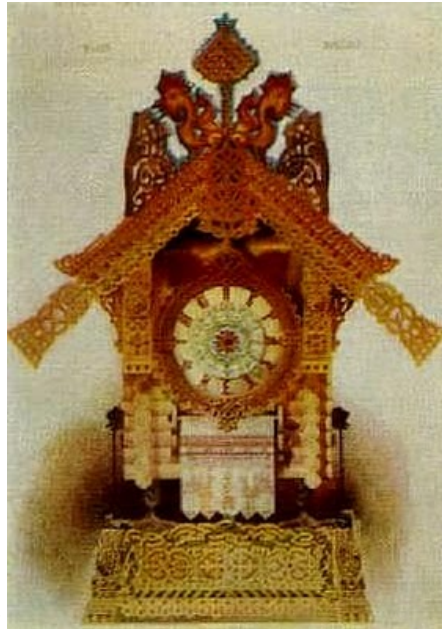
example of good society– and the rose tinted spectacles of memory have seen fit to lay wreaths at Stalin’s tomb.

In conclusion, here are two much fêted works of the Russian repertoire, pillars of “Russian Nationalism” but emerging out of entirely different motivation and with entirely different significance. © *Zane Dalal – June 2013*

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***Note to NCPA – Anindita, Phil, Jehangir.***

***Please source the following pictures from Victor Hartmann’s collection:***



***The Hut on Fowl’s Legs – Baba Yaga***



***The Unhatched Chicks***



***The Catacombs***

***The Great Gate of Kiev***

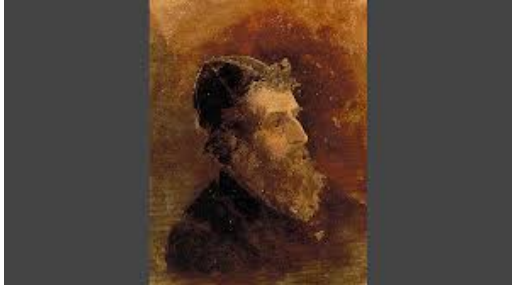


***Hartmann's pictures are available on the internet, we've used some of them before in the programme notes from the last time we did "Pictures". You may need them in higher resolution.***

***It would also be good to source a picture of Hartmann, Mussorgsky, Ravel and Shostakovich.***

***I hope Jehangir B. can help with this.***

***Please see next page for two more pictures. Samuel Goldenburg and Schmuyle. Polish Jews.***



Rich Jew

Poor Jew;

