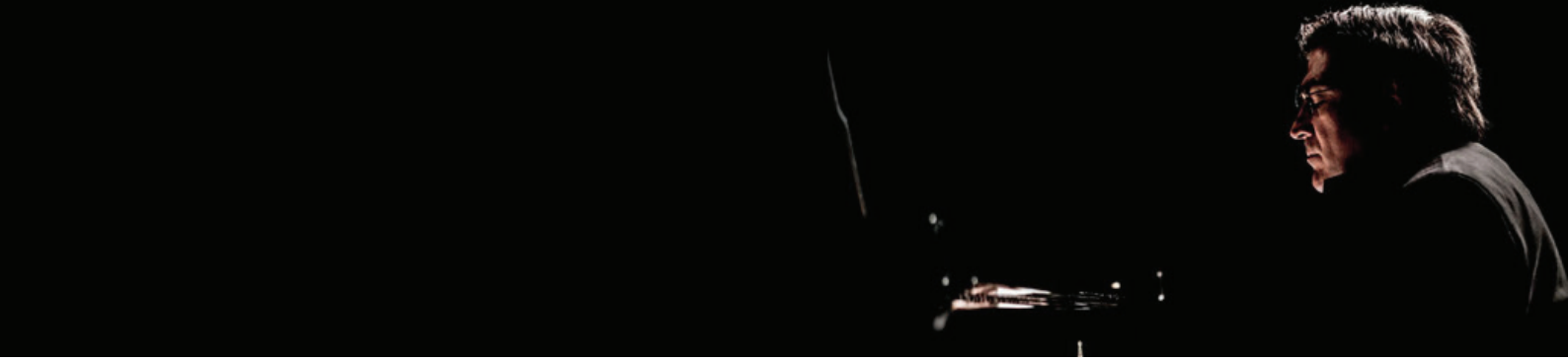

Russian Festival: Pictures at an Exhibition

This weekend marks the first of three subscription concerts dedicated solely to Russian composers. This evening, we'll enjoy music by Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, Schnittke, and Shostakovich. What a great way to start the new year!

DIMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born 25 September 1906; St. Petersburg, Russia
Died 9 August 1975; Moscow, Russia

Festive Overture, Opus 96

Composed: 1954
First performance: 6 November 1954; Moscow, Russia
Last MSO performance: March 2009; Erich Kunzel, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 3 oboes; 3 clarinets; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle); strings
Approximate duration: 7 minutes

Widely regarded as the greatest symphonist of the mid-20th century, Dmitri Shostakovich wrote 15 works in that genre. Additionally, his impressive compositional catalogue includes six concertos for various instruments, chamber music (including 15 string quartets), solo piano music, two operas and an operetta, several cantatas and oratorios, three ballets, 36 film scores, incidental music for 11 plays, choral music, and songs.

Like Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture*, Shostakovich's Opus 96 is an occasional piece. It was written to commemorate the 37th anniversary of the 1917 Revolution. Premiered at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, it has survived its original purpose to become part of the standard orchestral repertoire.

The composer patterned his brief work on the overture to Mikhail Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842). Set in the sunny key of A major, it opens with a ceremonial fanfare, then launches into toe-tapping music that is – by turns – lyrical, playful, and pompous. Perfect as a concert curtain-raiser, it also continues to be heard at celebratory events such as the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and the 2009 Nobel Prize Concert in Stockholm.

Recommended recording: Neeme Jarvi, Scottish National Orchestra (Chandos)

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891; Sontsovka, Russia
Died 5 March 1953; Moscow, Russia

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Opus 26

Composed: 1917-21
First performance: 16 December 1921; Chicago, Illinois
Last MSO performance: January 2008; Edward Gardner, conductor; Jeffrey Biegel, piano
Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; percussion (bass drum, castanets; cymbals; tambourine); strings
Approximate duration: 27 minutes

In the last years of tsarist Russia, Sergei Prokofiev, still in his 20s, made his name as a composer of music both weighty and sardonic. Following the Revolution, making his home mainly in the United States and then Paris, his mode of expression progressively became more settled and, one might say, more polished. He spent the last 17 years of his life back in the Soviet Union, however, both spurred on and restrained by the cultural policies of Stalin's regime. Throughout his life, he occupied himself with music for the stage, and was one of the 20th century's most distinguished creators of symphonies, concertos, and piano sonatas.

Prokofiev commenced work on his Opus 26 in 1917, but it got laid aside for other projects and for concertizing – in 1918, he left Russian for the United States; then, from 1920, France became his base – and was finally completed in America in 1921. Frederick Stock conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the work's premiere, with the composer playing the solo part. Neither that performance nor the subsequent ones in New York aroused much public excitement. Americans, Prokofiev said, "did not understand the work." Thankfully, that diagnosis has since changed: his Third is now one of the most popular piano concertos in the repertory.

The composer offered the following program notes:

The first movement opens quietly with a short introduction (Andante). The theme is announced by an unaccompanied clarinet and is continued by the violins for a few bars. Soon the tempo changes to Allegro, the strings having a passage in 16th notes, which leads to the statement of the principal subject by the piano. Discussion of this theme is carried on in a lively manner, both the piano and the orchestra having a good deal to say on the matter. A passage in chords for the piano alone leads to the more expressive second subject, heard in the oboe with a pizzicato accompaniment. This is taken up by the piano and developed at some length, eventually giving way to a bravura passage in triplets. At the climax of this section, the tempo reverts to Andante, and the orchestra gives out the first theme ff. The piano joins in, and the theme is subjected to an impressively broad treatment. In resuming the Allegro, the chief theme and the second subject are developed with increased brilliance, and the movement ends with an exciting crescendo.

The second movement consists of a theme with five variations. The theme is announced by the orchestra alone. In the first variation, the piano treats the opening of the theme in quasi-sentimental fashion, and resolves into a chain of trills, as the orchestra repeats the closing phrase. The tempo changes to Allegro for the second and the third variations, and the piano has brilliant figures, while snatches of the theme are introduced here and there in the orchestra. In Variation Four the tempo is once again Andante, and the piano and orchestra discourse on the theme in a quiet and meditative fashion. Variation Five is energetic (Allegro giusto). It leads without pause into a restatement of the theme by the orchestra, with delicate chordal embroidery in the piano.

The finale begins with a staccato theme for bassoons and pizzicato strings, which is interrupted by the blustering entry of the piano. The orchestra holds its own with the opening theme, however, and there is a good deal of argument, with frequent differences of opinion as regards key. Eventually the piano takes up the first theme and develops it to a climax. With a reduction of tone and slackening of tempo, an alternative theme is introduced in the woodwinds. The piano replies with a theme that is more in keeping with the caustic humor of the work. This material is developed, and there is a brilliant coda.

Recommended recording: Martha Argerich; Claudio Abbado, Berlin Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)

ALFRED SCHNITTKE

Born 24 November 1934; Engels, Russia
Died 3 August 1998; Hamburg, Germany

(K)ein Sommernachtstraum

Composed: 1984-85
First performance: 12 August 1985; Salzburg, Austria
Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere
Instrumentation: 4 flutes (4th doubling piccolo); 4 oboes; 4 clarinets (4th doubling bass clarinet); 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 4 trumpets; 4 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam tam, triangle, vibraphone); harp; celeste; harpsichord; piano; strings
Approximate duration: 10 minutes

> *The piece should be played in a concert of Shakespeare settings, though it has no direct connection with Shakespeare. Yet it is not for that reason that it is called (K)ein Sommernachtstraum* ["(Not) a Midsummer Night's Dream"]. *And that is all there is to say about my Mozart-Schubert related rondo.*
>
> – Alfred Schnittk

Like other composers of the 20th century (think Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Penderecki, Pärt, et al.), Alfred Schnitte's compositional style underwent a number of transformations across the decades. The works from his student days show the influence of Shostakovich, and he subsequently embraced 12-tone composition for a time, before settling into a more traditional tonal style. His extensive list of works includes operas, ballets, film music, symphonies, concertos, chamber music, choral music, and solo instrumental music.

Schnittke was born in Russia, but by the mid-1940s the family was living in Vienna. It was there that he fell in love with the music of Mozart and Schubert, two masters who provided his reference point in terms of "taste, manner, and style." In 1948, the family moved back to Russia and Schnittke completed his musical education – begun in Austria – at the Moscow Conservatory. Nevertheless, it was the Viennese masters, not the Russians, who continued to hold sway over his musical aesthetic.

Schnittke sometimes employed "polystylism" – a technique that juxtaposes various styles of music, both past and present – and he does so here. "The goal of my life is to unify serious music and light music, even if I break my neck in doing so," he once wrote. *(K)ein Sommernachtstraum* ["(Not) a Midsummer Night's Dream"] was commissioned for the Salzburg Festival. His cryptic statement (above) was presumably tongue-in-cheek, though the 1985 concert on which it was premiered featured Shakespeare-themed works, including Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing excerpts from Aribert Riemann's opera *Lear* (1978).

The work's main theme – a gentle minuet first sounded by solo violin and piano, then shared with flute and harpsichord – sounds like it might have been penned by one of the Viennese masters. In truth, though, it is taken from Schnittke's own *Gratulationsrondo*, composed in 1974 for a violinist friend's 50th birthday. "I did not steal all the 'antiquities' in this piece," he confessed. "I faked them."

(K)ein Sommernachtstraum reveals itself to be a set of variations, employing any number of styles, including a fugue and a boisterous march. As the music becomes ever more clamorous, there is a momentary vain attempt to restore order. The orchestra, however, insists on having its own cacophonous way, finally crashing into a wall of cluster chords. Following a stupefied silence, the opening melody returns, sounding somewhat traumatized by the proceedings.

Recommended recording: Valery Polyansky, Russian State Symphony Orchestra (Chandos)

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Born 21 March 1839; Karevo, Russia
Died 28 March 1881; St. Petersburg, Russia

Pictures at an Exhibition

Composed: 1874 (for solo piano); orchestrated by Gorchakov in 1954
Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo); 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn); 3 clarinets (3rd doubling soprano saxophone); bass clarinet; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; 2 tubas; timpani; percussion (bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, snare drum, tam tam, triangle, wood block, xylophone); harp; celeste; strings
Approximate duration: 31 minutes

The pictures in the title of Mussorgsky's suite are those of Victor Hartmann (1834-1873), a close friend of the composer. Hartmann's death at age 39 in August 1873 left Mussorgsky profoundly grief-stricken. In St. Petersburg the following spring, the critic Vladimir Stassov spearheaded a posthumous exhibition of over 400 of Hartmann's paintings, drawings, costumes, and architectural sketches. Mussorgsky's visit to the public showing, coupled with his wish to write a piece in memory of his friend, led him to create *Pictures at an Exhibition* for solo piano.

In a fit of manic inspiration, Mussorgsky composed *Pictures* in just 20 days in June 1874. Each character piece in the cycle depicts one of Hartmann's works; the set is introduced – and occasionally separated – by the "Promenade," which portrays Mussorgsky's progress through the art gallery. We have no record of a public performance of the piano pieces in the composer's lifetime.

Across the years, several musicians – including Mikhail Tushmalov, Sir Henry Wood, and Maurice Ravel – created orchestrations of the piece. On these concerts, we hear the one by Russian composer Sergei Gorchkaov (1905-1976). In contrast to the familiar orchestration by Ravel – with its palette of French Impressionism – Gorchakov aimed at a more Russian character by concentrating on the lower strings (especially the cellos) and by giving more weight to the woodwinds, brass, and percussion; in doing so, he created deeper textures and sonorities. "The result," stated Alex Ross after hearing Kurt Masur conduct the New York Philharmonic in 1992, "is a darker and sleeker whole."

The **Promenade** takes Mussorgsky into the exhibition and later accompanies him as he strolls through it, mirroring a change in disposition from one work of art to another.

Gnomus: According to Stassov's commentary in the catalogue, Hartmann depicts "a kind of nutcracker, a gnome into whose mouth you put a nut to crack. The gnome accompanies his droll movements with savage shrieks."

The Old Castle: A troubadour stands before a medieval castle in France, singing his sad, lonely song. Despite the location of the castle, Mussorgsky's haunting melody shows the clear influence of Russian folk music.

Tuileries: Children squabble and play free-spiritedly in the famous Parisian park. Hartmann lived in Paris for a time and got to know it well.

Bydlo: A Polish ox-cart with large, heavy wheels lumbers toward us and then retreats into the distance. ("Bydlo" is the Polish word for "cattle.")

Ballet of Little Chicks in Their Shells: Based on Hartmann's 1871 costume designs for a ballet, this brief scherzo depicts children dressed in their dance attire, "enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor, with canary heads put on like helmets."

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: Sometimes titled "Two Polish Jews, One Rich, the Other Poor," Mussorgsky parodies the two men by snobbish proclamations from the patriarchal Goldenberg and servile agitation from the beggar Schmuyle.

Limoges: In 1866, Hartmann painted more than 150 watercolors of the French city. Here, the marketplace bustles with the peasant women's hyperactivity.

Catacombae: Hartmann's picture shows the artist, a friend, and a guide with a lamp inside a Roman-era sepulchre in Paris. The music falls into two sections, the second being a transformation of the Promenade that Mussorgsky labeled "Cum mortius in lingua morta" (With the Dead in a Dead Language).

Baba Yaga – The Hut on Hen's Legs: His friend's design for an elaborate bronze clock reminded Mussorgsky of Baba Yaga, a malevolent hag of Russian folklore, who was said to live on a hut supported by chicken legs and to fly about in a mortar in pursuit of her human prey.

The Great Gate of Kiev: Hartmann submitted his design for a huge stone gate, in the immense old Russian style, to be constructed in the Ukrainian city of Kiev. His architectural plan did not win the contest, but in any event the gate was never built. Nevertheless, Mussorgsky and Gorchakov together constructed one of the great symphonic moments: With its opulent nobility and its blazing brass and crashing cymbals, for sheer orchestral display, "The Great Gate of Kiev" has few rivals.

Recommended recording: Kurt Masur, London Philharmonic Orchestra (Teldec)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.