

# Pictures at an Exhibition

## MODEST MUSSORGSKY

**BORN** 1839, Karevo, Russia

**DIED** 1881, St Petersburg, Russia

**ORCHESTRATED BY** Maurice Ravel

**BORN** 1875, Ciboure, France

**DIED** 1937, Paris, France

**FIRST PERFORMANCE** 19 October  
1922, Paris Opéra, conducted by Serge  
Koussevitzky

**DURATION** 35 minutes



**1 Promenade**

**2 Gnomus**

**3 Promenade**

**4 The Old Castle**

**5 Promenade**

**6 Tuileries**

**7 Bydlo**

**8 Promenade**

**9 Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells**

**10 Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle**

**11 Limoges: the Market**

**12 Catacombs – Con mortuis in lingua  
mortua**

**13 The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga)**

**14 The Great Gate of Kiev**

'He likes what is coarse, unpolished and ugly.' Tchaikovsky's withering appraisal of his compatriot and colleague Modest Mussorgsky is hardly flattering. And yet there's a kernel of truth in it too. For in his music, Mussorgsky did indeed favour the rawness of direct expression in a way that contrasts starkly with the luscious Romanticism of Tchaikovsky. And it's shown nowhere more clearly than in his powerful suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Maybe it had something to do with his background. Despite the young Modest showing promise as a pianist and composer, his parents decided on a military career for the lad. He resigned from the army at the first opportunity, however, and fled back to music, taking composition lessons from composer Mily Balakirev and struggling to support his musical activities by working as a low-grade civil servant (despite being twice fired from the post). He lived in a commune, and infused his music with the heady, radical ideas he came into contact with there – that art should reflect the grittiness of real life and search for the deepest truths.

### A radical soulmate

Mussorgsky found a soulmate in the visual artist Victor Hartmann, who shared his ideals in the worlds of painting, design and architecture. The two men were introduced in 1862 by the art critic and historian Vladimir Stasov, and they quickly became close friends, drawn together by a freewheeling, progressive creative spirit. So when Hartmann suddenly died in 1873 following a heart attack, at the age of just 39, the composer was devastated.

Stasov set about organising a memorial exhibition of Hartmann's drawings, paintings and designs for the following spring, and when Mussorgsky visited the exhibition in spring 1874, he was deeply moved – and immediately inspired, rushing to work on a set of piano pieces based on Hartmann's images, which he completed on 22 June. 'Sounds and ideas fill the air,' he wrote to Stasov, 'and I can barely scribble them down fast enough.' His intention, he continued, was to depict himself as though he were a visitor 'roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly, in order to come closer to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly thinking of his departed friend'.

### Ravel's orchestral magic

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is now one of the best-loved memorial pieces in the repertoire – but it was entirely unknown in the composer's lifetime. It was almost certainly never played while Mussorgsky was alive, and the piano score was only discovered among Mussorgsky's belongings after his death by his musical executor, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who set about editing the manuscript and arranging for it to be published in 1886.

Even then, however, it generated little interest from pianists. But almost immediately, the work was seized upon by composers keen to recast Mussorgsky's piano writing across an orchestral canvas. The first

orchestration came as early as 1891, but Maurice Ravel's masterful reimagining came much later, in 1922. It was a commission from conductor Serge Koussevitzky for his Boston Symphony Orchestra (ironically, Koussevitzky wasn't even aware of *Pictures* until Ravel drew his attention to it). And it quickly became a much-loved orchestral showpiece – partly because of Ravel's grand, glittering orchestration, and partly because Koussevitzky had cannily secured exclusive performance rights for five years, during which time he turned it into a staple of the Boston repertoire, in concert and in new-fangled recordings, heard all over the world. Despite his sumptuous reimagining of Mussorgsky's rough-edged piano pieces, however, Ravel remains remarkably faithful to the original – only in the final *Great Gate of Kiev* does he allow himself the indulgence of adding a few notes of his own.

### The music

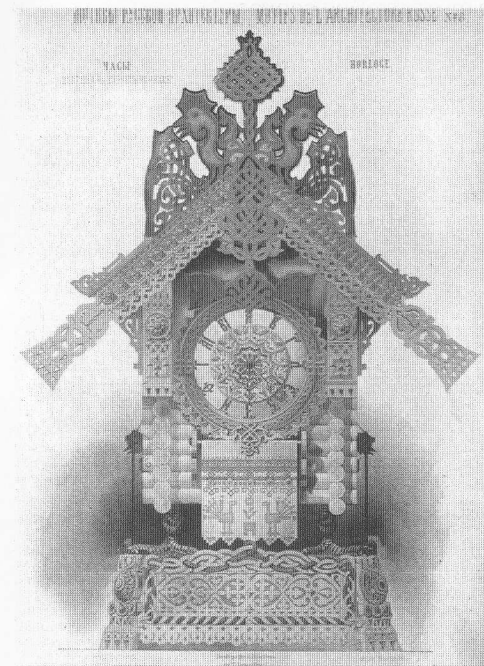
Mussorgsky's masterstroke is to introduce a majestic **Promenade** theme representing himself strolling between the artworks. Ravel gives the opening *Promenade* theme to glowing choirs of brass, as if to summon us to attention. Hartmann's first picture is **Gnomus**, a gnome-shaped nutcracker that he designed as a children's Christmas present, and which Mussorgsky depicts in bad-tempered outbursts alternating with passages of ominous calm.

Following another, more reflective, **Promenade** for solo horn and woodwind, Mussorgsky moves on to **The Old Castle**, based on a Hartmann watercolour of a troubadour serenading his loved one by moonlight at an ancient edifice he visited in Italy. Ravel gives the main melody to a doleful solo saxophone.

Another **Promenade** seems to break off in mid-flow, leading straight into the miniature scherzo **Tuileries**, depicting children playing and squabbling in the famous gardens of

Paris, the city where Hartmann had lived for a time. With barely a break, Mussorgsky moves on to **Bydlo**, a depiction of a lumbering Polish ox cart that begins quietly in the distance with a melody Ravel assigns to a solo tuba, before building to a mighty orchestral climax as the cart draws nearer.

A quiet, rather hesitant **Promenade** finds Mussorgsky somewhat in shock after the power of *Bydlo*, but he soon finds solace in the chirruping woodwind of the delicate Ballad of the **Chicks in their Shells**, based on Hartmann's costume designs for the 1876 St Petersburg ballet *Trilby*. Mussorgsky owned two drawings by Hartmann, one entitled *A Rich Jew Wearing a Fur Hat* and the other *Poor Jew: Sandomierz*, and he seems to have imagined them together in **Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle**, which describes an argument between the two men, the first wealthy and pompous (with an expansive melody in low strings), and the second poor and querulous (a stuttering figure on muted trumpet).



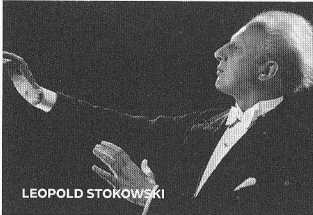
Mussorgsky moves on the bustle and gossip of **Limoges: The Market**, before plunging us into the sepulchral darkness of the Parisian **Catacombs**, ancient underground bone-filled tombs that Hartmann had visited while living in the French capital. Ravel preserves the original's raw intensity in a sparse orchestration for brass alone, alternating loud and soft as the sounds echo around the endless vaults. The rest of the orchestra joins for **Con mortuis in lingua mortua** ('With the dead in a dead language'), which transfigures the *Promenade* theme into an eerie invocation.

The terrifying child-eating witch of Russian folklore, Baba-Yaga, breaks the calm with the fierce, unpredictable music of **The Hut on Fowl's Legs**, based on Hartmann's elaborate design for a clock inspired by her chicken-footed home (pictured below), before even she is halted in her tracks by the grand vision of **The Great Gate of Kiev**. Hartmann's picture is a design for an entrance gate to the Ukrainian capital that he submitted in an architectural competition in 1866. As well as two brief, quiet chorales based on Russian orthodox chant, Mussorgsky brings back his *Promenade* theme as part of the movement's grand culmination, and Ravel ensures a sense of pomp and ceremony with pealing bells and thundering drums.

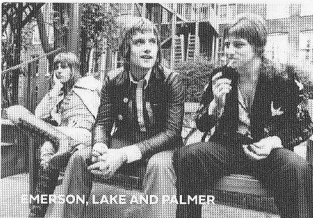
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# Alternative Pictures

How Mussorgsky's piano masterpiece has spawned myriad adaptations for orchestras, jazz groups, rock bands, electronics and more



LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI



EMERSON, LAKE AND PALMER



DUKE ELLINGTON

Ravel's masterly orchestration of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is the one that's found the firmest foothold in the repertoire – but it's far from the only adaptation of Mussorgsky's piano original.

The earliest came a mere five years after Mussorgsky's death, in 1891, in an orchestration by **Mikhail Tushmalov**, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov. The 1915 orchestration by British conductor **Sir Henry Wood** remained extremely popular until Ravel's came along in 1922 – at which point, in deference to the great French composer, Wood withdrew his version and even banned public performance of it.

Despite conducting Ravel's orchestration many times, **Leopold Stokowski** took enormous liberties with Mussorgsky's original in his own 1939 version for huge orchestra. And realising how popular Ravel's had become, in 1924 Mussorgsky's publisher Bessel commissioned Russian-born pianist **Leonidas Leonardi** (a student of Ravel, ironically) to concoct a rival orchestration. It never took off.

There's been a respected, more recent orchestration from conductor and pianist **Vladimir Ashkenazy** that stays closer than Ravel's to Mussorgsky's original intentions (Ravel was working from Rimsky-Korsakov's amended edition of Mussorgsky's piano work), and English composer and conductor **Elgar Howarth** arranged it for the Grimethorpe Colliery Band.

But Mussorgsky's *Pictures* hasn't just stayed in the classical world. There's a rock version from **Emerson, Lake and Palmer**, an electronic adaptation by Japanese artist **Tomita**, a jazz treatment by **Duke Ellington**, and even **Michael Jackson** sampled *The Great Gate of Kiev* on his song *HIStory*.

Most weirdly of all, however, pianist **Vladimir Horowitz** produced an alternative solo piano version based on Ravel's orchestration, making – mind-bendingly – a piano piece out of the orchestration of a piano piece. But perhaps he needn't have bothered: it's the success of Ravel's orchestral version that has prompted pianists in the 20th century to rediscover the raw intensity of Mussorgsky's solo piano original.