

Notes for Trio Solisti Recording

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition

Promenade

Gnomus

Promenade

The Old Castle

Promenade

Tuilleries (Dispute between Children at Play)

Bydlo (Cattle)

Promenade

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks

Samuel Goldenberg and “Schmuyle” (missing the “m”)

The Market at Limoges

The Catacombs

Cum mortuis in lingua mortua (With the Dead in a Dead Language)

The Hut on “Fowl’s”(not Hen’s) Legs (Baba Yaga)

The Great Gate of Kiev

The pairing of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Ravel’s Piano Trio on this recording is no simple accident and goes even beyond the obvious. That Ravel orchestrated Mussorgsky’s *Pictures* from its original solo piano version is a first step in explaining this happy combination, but there is more to the story. A number of years ago Jon Klibonoff, pianist of Trio Solisti, made an arrangement of the work for piano trio and clarinet (including bass clarinet), thus retaining the string and wind colorations of the piece. The daring decision to arrange it for piano trio was made collaboratively by the ensemble in many long sessions where each member carefully examined his or her part for possibilities in the process of transcription. Members of Trio Solisti were concerned, first of all, by how close a piano trio version would stand to Mussorgsky’s original piano composition, and secondly to what Ravel achieved in his orchestration of the work. Thirdly, they were inspired by the monumental ideas of *Pictures at an Exhibition* that make it one of the world’s most evocative, expressive, and best-loved pieces. They were convinced it would work for piano trio. For reference they turned often to the Horowitz recording of the piano version and to the Fritz Reiner/Chicago Symphony interpretation of Ravel’s orchestration. Through these efforts, Trio Solisti members found a way to enrich the piano version while retaining its integrity, fashioning a new sound for the piece and creating a genuine chamber music work that allows all three players to be soloists.

Violinist Maria Bachmann is the first to admit that it was a challenge requiring flexibility and creative ideas to achieve Ravel’s orchestral colors in their string sounds. She points out specifically the saxophone serenade in the second piece, “The Old Castle.” How does one make a violin sound like a saxophone? “Less vibrato and an intense, slow bow,” Maria concluded. Other movements such as No. 8, “The Catacombs,” presented the problem of whether to honor the faster tempo of the piano version or the more sustained one of the orchestral version. Again, Trio Solisti was inspired by the Horowitz transcription in which he takes many freedoms with the original score. Trio Solisti left the piano part mostly intact, Bachmann explained, with what she approximates as a 60/40 ratio in what was retained. While a purist might argue this, one must note the long list of effective orchestral versions of *Pictures*, including Mikhail Tushmalov’s 1886 version that omitted seven movements, Stokowski’s 1938 version that excluded the fifth “Promenade,” and even Ravel’s masterpiece which also left out the fifth “Promenade.” Trio Solisti includes *all* fifteen movements of Ravel’s orchestration and what has now become the accepted version of Mussorgsky’s original

piano composition. Perhaps we should also mention the myriad of jazz, rock, and heavy metal interpretations in which Mussorgsky's wonderful music somehow survives.

Mussorgsky's inspiration for *Pictures at an Exhibition* were the paintings of his brilliant young artist and architect friend Victor Hartmann, whose early death at 39 so grieved Mussorgsky that he decided to write a piece in his memory. The 1874 memorial exhibition of Hartmann's work in St. Petersburg gave Mussorgsky impetus for this piano suite. In turn, the solo piano version cried out for the glorious orchestration given it by Maurice Ravel in 1922.

The fifteen movements of the work are punctuated by four "Promenade" sections suggesting the starting and stopping of a walk through an art gallery. To hear the return of the majestic theme lends both integrity and continuity to the work as a whole. "Gnomus" is based on Hartmann's drawing of a toy nutcracker in the form of a gnome with huge jaws while "The Old Castle" refers to Hartmann's watercolor of an Italian castle with a troubadour standing before it holding a lute. "Tuilleries" or "Dispute between Children at Play" pictures the French garden near the Louvre with, as the title suggest, children at play in it. "Bydlo" is the musical interpretation of a Polish oxcart. The cheeping, chirping scherzo, "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks," is based on Hartmann's costume designs for the ballet *Trilbi*. "Samuel Goldberg un Schmuyle" is often retitled as "Two Polish Jews, Rich and Poor" in which a beggar tries to wheedle something out of a rich man on a street corner in a Polish ghetto. "The Market at Limoges" pictures the bustling market in the city of central France. In "Catacombs" Hartmann depicts the subterranean tombs of Paris where the architect himself studies a pile of skulls. The "Cum mortuis in lingua mortua" is a darker restatement of the "Promenade" theme and is best explained by its translation from Latin: "With the Dead in a Dead Language." (Mussorgsky's own footnote to the music reads: *The creative spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me to the skulls, calls out to them, and the skulls begin to glow dimly from within.*) "The Hut on Fowl's Legs" portrays a carved clock on the hut of Baba Yaga, a witch of Russian legends, who rides through the air in a mortar which she uses to grind up human bones for food. The final "Great Gate of Kiev" represents Hartmann's drawing of a monumental gate for Tsar Alexander II. Mussorgsky's music evokes a great procession and the ringing of bells. The Promenade theme recurs for the last time, binding together the entire suite. While Hartmann's drawing won the design competition for the gate, the gate itself was never built. Fortunately the music, in all its versions, remains.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Piano Trio in A Minor

Modéré

Pantom: Assez vif

Passacaille: Très large

Final: Animé

"I think that at any moment I shall go mad or lose my mind," Ravel wrote to a friend. "I have never worked so hard, with such insane heroic rage." The source of his rage was the outbreak of World War I, and the result of his labors was the magnificent A Minor Piano Trio begun in 1913 and premiered in Paris on January 28, 1915. Coupled with its technical perfection, the Trio contains some of the most fervent and impassioned music of Ravel's entire output, rivaling his great tone poem *Daphne and Chloe* in massiveness and scope. While Ravel's objective in his music was always technical perfection, this work goes far beyond that in its depth of expression. A certain struggle between heart and mind informs the whole piece from its dark opening to its spectacular conclusion.

We are hardly aware of sonata form in the first movement because of its haunting sadness, but rest assured that it is there. We are probably more conscious of the exotic rhythmic patterns as Ravel employs Basque dance forms of his native region. Ingeniously, he gives the impression of typically Basque irregular meter by dividing the even rhythmic pattern of eight notes to the bar into a

pattern of 3+2+3. Interestingly, this is similar to the opening theme of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* with its unusual eleven beats, a distinctly Russian folk music influence. The movement gathers a forbidding momentum before it ends quietly. The piano part is remarkable in its dark bass and eerie treble notes, a pattern that will continue throughout the work.

The *Pantom* of the second movement refers to a form of verse used in Malaysian poetry. Here, again, Ravel's love of the exotic—something he shared with the poets and artists of his day—belies his elegant use of form. The movement might be heard as a *scherzo* with a superficially bright beginning that turns to urgency and then solemnity. The strings play a sad waltz against a conflicting rhythmic pattern by the piano.

The third movement, a stately *Passacaille* reflecting Baroque techniques, is a haunting set of ten variations progressive in their intensity until the seventh one. The piano intones a funereal march joined first by the cello and then the violin. The intensity heightens until the piano begins a descent under a moving cello part. One long arch spans this whole movement, with a high point about two-thirds the way through. It winds down to a conclusion with the piano singing the mournful melody of the opening.

The *Final* is orchestral in nature, containing many references to Ravel's Spanish influences. We are reminded again of the rhythmic influence of Basque music with the use of irregular 5/4 and 7/4 meters. The piano plays huge harp-like *glissandi* that lead to gigantic orchestral sounds. The work comes to a dazzling climax with the strings in endless trills over the dramatic chords of the piano, creating a sound world that is unique to the piano trio literature.

The Piano Trio reflects, in every way, Ravel's statement that "Great music, I have always felt, must come from the heart. Any music created by technique and brains alone is not worth the paper it is written on." Ravel's many other statements calling for technical perfection as the goal of music conflict with this notion, but one must remember that it also seemed Ravel's goal to be elusive. We must recall that he said of himself, "I am artificial by nature." Nothing, however, seems artificial in this work that is considered to be one of the genuine 20th century masterpieces for piano trio.

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