

Concerts of Friday, September 16, and Saturday, September 17, 2011

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

FESTIVE OVERTURE, OPUS 96

Composed in 1954

Premiered on November 6, 1954 in Moscow, Russia with with Alexander Melik-Pashayev conducting the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra.

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on September 25, 1906

Died in Moscow, Russia, on August 9, 1975.

The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on September 23-26, 1975 on the campuses of Clemson, Bob Jones and Appalachian State Universities and at Ovens Auditorium. The thirteenth and most recent performance took place on June 13-16, 2004 with Albert-George Schram conducting at Summer Pops.

Dmitri Shostakovich composed his *Festive Overture* in the autumn of 1954. A concert in celebration of the 37th anniversary of the October Revolution was scheduled to take place at the Moscow Bolshoi Theater in early November of that year. As the concert date approached, Vasili Nebol'sin, a conductor at the Bolshoi, realized that there was no piece on the program to commemorate the historic event. And so, Nebol'sin visited Shostakovich at his Moscow apartment.

Lev Lebedinsky, a friend of Shostakovich, was present during Nebol'sin's visit. In a conversation with author Elizabeth Wilson, reprinted in her *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994), Lebedinsky recalled that once Nebol'sin departed, Shostakovich said:

“Lev Nikolayvich, sit down here beside me and I'll write the overture in no time at all.”

Then he started composing. The speed with which he wrote was truly astounding. Moreover, when he wrote light music he was able to talk, make jokes and compose simultaneously, like the legendary Mozart. He laughed and chuckled, and in the meanwhile work was under way and the music was being written down.

As Shostakovich completed each page of the score, a courier delivered the music—the ink still wet—to Nebol'sin at the Bolshoi. The dress rehearsal took place two days later. On November 6, 1954, Alexander Melik-Pashayev conducted the Bolshoi Orchestra in the world premiere of Shostakovich's *Festive Overture*. Some commentators have suggested that the energy and high

spirits of the *Festive Overture* relate not just to the anniversary of the October Revolution, but also the death in 1953 of Shostakovich's long-time nemesis, Joseph Stalin.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Duration: c. 7 minutes

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OPUS 23

Composed in 1875

Premiered on October 25, 1875 in Boston, Massachusetts with Hans von Bülow as soloist.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, on May 7, 1840

Died in St. Petersburg, Russia, on November 6, 1893

The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on October 29 – 30, 1951 with James Christian Pfohl conducting in the auditorium of Piedmont Junior High School (now Middle School). The thirteenth and most recent performance set took place on April 28-29, 2006 with Alan Yamamoto conducting in the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed his First Piano Concerto in the span of approximately seven weeks, completing it on January 2, 1875. Three days after putting the finishing touches on the work, Tchaikovsky played his new Concerto for Nikolai Rubinstein—head of the Moscow Conservatory, and a superb concert pianist. Tchaikovsky, then a professor at the Conservatory, hoped that Rubinstein would agree to be the soloist in the Concerto's premiere.

A meeting between Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein took place at the Conservatory. In a letter dated February 2, 1878, Tchaikovsky described the encounter to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck. Written three years after the episode, the letter attests that Rubinstein's verbal assault was seared in the Tchaikovsky's memory.

Tchaikovsky began to play his new Concerto, all the while anxiously awaiting Rubinstein's comments. Finally, Tchaikovsky rose from the piano and, summoning his courage, asked Rubinstein:

“Well?” It was then that there began to flow from Nikolay Grigoryevich's mouth a stream of words, quiet at first, but subsequently assuming more and more the tone of Jove, the Thunderer. It appeared that my concerto was worthless, that it was unplayable, that passages were trite, awkward, and so clumsy that it was

impossible to put them right, that as composition it was bad and tawdry, that I had filched this bit from here and that bit from there, and there were only two or three pages that could be retained, and that the rest would have to be scrapped or completely revised...

The devastated Tchaikovsky hurried out of the room and proceeded upstairs. Rubinstein followed Tchaikovsky, and offered to play the concerto, if the composer would revise the work in accordance with his demands. By this point, Tchaikovsky had more than his fill of Rubinstein's comments: "'I won't change a single note,' I replied, 'and I'll publish it just as it is now!'"

The soloist for the Concerto's premiere was the distinguished German conductor and pianist, Hans von Bülow, for whom Tchaikovsky had long maintained tremendous admiration. Tchaikovsky dedicated the work to Bülow, who gave the Concerto's premiere while on an American concert tour. And so, one of the most beloved Russian piano concertos received its first performance on October 25, 1875—not in Tchaikovsky's homeland, but in Boston, Massachusetts!

Tchaikovsky did later pen some revisions to the Concerto, both for the score's publication in 1879, and for a new, 1889 edition. In time, Nikolai Rubinstein finally reversed his scathing opinion of Tchaikovsky's Concerto, and even became one of its greatest interpreters.

The Concerto is in three movements. The first—by far the longest of the three—opens with one of the most beloved episodes in all of concert music (*Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso*). This famous sequence is, in fact, the introduction to the central portion of the opening movement (*Allegro con spirito*), whose first theme is based upon a Ukraine folk melody. The slow movement (*Andantino semplice*) features a lovely melody, first introduced by the flute over muted, pizzicato strings. The brilliant finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) includes two principal themes, the second of which makes a glorious appearance at the work's conclusion.

In addition to the solo piano, the Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

Duration: c. 32 minutes

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

Composed in 1874, orchestrated by Maurice Ravel in 1923

The premiere of the Ravel orchestration took place in Paris, France, on May 3, 1923, with Serge Koussevitsky conducting.

Modest Mussorgsky

Born in Karevo, district of Pskov, Russia, on March 21, 1839

Died in St. Petersburg, Russia, on March 28, 1881

The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on February 12-13, 1975 on the campus of Furman University and at Ovens Auditorium. The eighth and most recent performance set took place on October 22-23, 1999 with Roberto Minczuk conducting in the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

In 1873, the Russian artist Viktor Hartmann died at the age of 39. After Hartmann's death, the St. Petersburg Society of Architects presented an exhibition of Hartmann's works. One of the people attending the exhibition was Hartmann's dear friend, the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky.

Mussorgsky was as profoundly impressed with the quality of Hartmann's works as he was saddened by the loss of his friend. Mussorgsky decided to offer a tribute to Hartmann in the form of a musical representation of several of the pieces of art featured at the St. Petersburg exhibit. In 1874, Modest Mussorgsky completed his work for solo piano, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, published after the composer's death in 1881.

While many critics have suggested that Mussorgsky did not write in a particularly idiomatic fashion for the piano, the original version of *Pictures* can make a stunning impact when interpreted by a sympathetic virtuoso. Still, it was not until Maurice Ravel applied his brilliant talents to Mussorgsky's original score that the work was destined for the immense popularity it enjoys today. Conductor Serge Koussevitsky commissioned Ravel's orchestration for the annual *Paris Concerts Koussevitsky*, where it premiered, to great acclaim, on May 3, 1923. Since that time, the Mussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition* has been celebrated as a quintessential showpiece for orchestras and conductors alike. It is one of the most performed and recorded works in the concert repertoire.

Musical Analysis

Promenade: Allegro giusto, nel modo russo; senza allegrezza, ma poco sostenuto—The *Promenade* serves as a connecting motif between the musical portrayals of the various pictures. Russian music critic Vladimir Stassov described the *Promenade* as depicting the composer "moving now to the left, now to the right, now wandering about aimlessly, now eagerly making for one of the pictures..."

I. *Gnomus: Vivo*—Many of Hartmann's works disappeared during the period between the 1874 St. Petersburg exhibition and Ravel's 1923 orchestration of Mussorgsky's composition. There is disagreement as to the exact nature of the picture that inspired this music. In the original piano edition, Stassov describes Hartmann's work: "A dwarf walks about awkwardly on crooked little legs." However, Alfred Frankenstein, longtime Music and Art Editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, stated that "(t)he picture was a design for a nutcracker in the form of a gnome with huge jaws."

Promenade: Moderato commodo e con delicatezza—A more introspective statement of the *Promenade* theme serves as a bridge to the following picture.

II. *Il vecchio castello: Andante*—The painting depicts an old Italian castle, before which a lute-bearing troubadour stands.

Promenade: Moderato non tanto, pesante—A brief, weighty restatement of the *Promenade* leads to:

III. *Tuileries: Allegretto non troppo, capriccioso*—Mussorgsky’s own subtitle for this section is “Children Quarreling After Play.” The painting depicts the Parisian Tuileries gardens, where children play under the watchful eye of their nurses.

IV. *Bydlo: Sempre moderato pesante*—“Bydlo” is the Polish word for “cattle.” Hartmann’s watercolor depicts an ox-drawn cart with massive wooden wheels.

Promenade; Tranquillo—A short reprise of the *Promenade* serves as a bridge to:

V. *Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells: Scherzino: Vivo leggiere*—The sketch that inspired this delightful miniature scherzo was made by Hartmann for the ballet, *Trilby*. It features costumed children impersonating chicks newly emerging from their shells.

VI. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: Andante*—The title of this section is the creation of Stassov—Mussorgsky’s original reads, “Two Polish Jews; one rich, the other poor.” This episode appears to be based upon a Hartmann drawing of the Sandomir ghetto. Mussorgsky owned the drawing and loaned it to the St. Petersburg exhibit. The exchange between the wealthy Goldenberg (lower strings supported by woodwinds) and Schmuyle (muted trumpet) eventually erupts into argument as the two simultaneously attempt to express themselves.

Here, Ravel omits Mussorgsky’s repetition of the *Promenade* and proceeds to:

VII. *The Market Place in Limoges: Allegretto vivo sempre scherzando*—Hartmann’s watercolor portrays the façade of the Limoges Cathedral. Mussorgsky focused on a small portion of the watercolor, depicting market women engaged in lively conversation. The quicksilver musical portrayal of their gossip is interrupted by:

VIII. *Catacombae: Sepulchrum Romanum; Largo*—The painting depicts Hartmann and a friend standing in a Paris catacomb, observing a pile of skulls illuminated by a guide’s lantern. Brass pronouncements alternating loud and soft dynamics lead directly to:

Cum mortuis in lingua mortua: Andante non troppo, con lamento—Mussorgsky’s own footnote to this section’s title reads: “A Latin text: ‘With the Dead in a Dead Language.’ Well may it be in Latin! 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.”

A moment of silence is shattered by:

IX. *Baba-Yaga—The Hut on Hen’s Legs: Allegro con brio, feroce—Andante mosso—Allegro molto*—Baba-Yaga is a mythical Russian witch who lured victims into her hut. There, Baba-Yaga ground her prey’s bones with a giant mortar that she also used to transport herself through the air. Hartmann’s drawing is a representation of a huge clock in the shape of the witch’s hut that, according to legend, stood on four chicken feet, thereby allowing the quick capture of each new victim. Mussorgsky’s musical portrayal of the witch’s grotesque hut and her flight leads without pause to:

X. *The Great Gate of Kiev: Allegro alla breve. Maestoso. Con grandezza*—The final picture represented Hartmann’s entry in a competition to erect a gateway in Kiev. The gateway was intended to serve as a memorial to Czar Alexander II’s escape from assassination. Hartmann envisioned a massive and ornate structure, featuring a cupola in the form of a Slavonic war helmet.

The Ravel orchestration is scored for two piccolos, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, two harps, celeste, percussion and strings.

Duration: c. 30 minutes

Musicians Emeriti

The Charlotte Symphony gratefully acknowledges the following Musicians Emeriti who served with distinction:

Dorothy Cole, Cello, 1977-2011

Alice Merrill Kavadlo, Principal Viola, 1975-2011

Bette Roth, Principal Harp, 1971-2011

Wolfgang Roth, Principal Second Violin, 1971-2011

These retired musicians may grace our concert stage from time to time this season.