



Art That Inspired – Traverse Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

Pictures at an Exhibition is a colorful, exciting musical journey depicting a visitor to an art gallery with an exhibition of paintings and drawings by the artist, architect Viktor Hartmann. Modest Mussorgsky, 1839-1881, wrote this work as a tribute to his friend Viktor after he unexpectedly passed away at the age of 39. Mussorgsky took the passing of his friend badly and his work suffered. Once the exhibition of Stasov's works took place, Mussorgsky found the inspiration he needed to work again, Stasov's art.

The *Promenade* serves as both the first main theme we hear and the connecting material between subsequent movements. The first *Promenade* is a proud, stately melody that is lead by the trumpet before the rest of the ensemble joins.

Gnomus is about a grumpy gnome who fancies himself the King of the Gnomes. He is angry and aggressive. This is depicted by the lowest voices in the ensemble, the clarinet, bassoon, double bass, trombone, and percussion. Meanwhile, the upper voices represented by the flute, clarinet, and violin act as the sneaky creatures scurrying around the gnome trying to avoid being spotted. The *Promenade* that follows takes on a darker mood presented at first by the trombone and then copied by the woodwinds. This time it is shorter and meant more as a reaction to having just viewed *Gnomus*.

The Old Castle is telling the story of what was once a grand castle that has now fallen into disrepair. The melody is stated by the bassoon in a range of the instrument that creates a sense of being far away, as if an echo from the past. It is then passed around between the woodwinds before returning back to the bassoon. The rhythmic ostinato in the double bass seems to go on forever, providing a sense of timelessness. The next connecting *Promenade* again starts with the trumpet but then has a heavier sound as the instruments stay mostly in their lower ranges.

The *Tuileries* is representing a group of children playing, and quarreling, in a garden. The woodwinds represent the children running around while the bassoon and violin play a secondary melody that is indicative of the adults standing around the children watching.

The Oxcart is a slow plodding journey made by a solo ox, in this case the trombone. The entire movement is one large crescendo, gradually growing louder, as the ox approaches and then diminuendo, becoming softer, as it passes and continues on its journey. The following *Promenade* hangs in the air in the highest range of the woodwinds and strings as if it is very fragile and could break after such a heavy load carried by the ox with a hint of what is to come next.

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks is by far the most playful movement. Originally intended to be the set and costume design for a ballet, Mussorgsky utilized the comedic idea of a dancing unhatched chick to

produce melodic that is short and pecky to represent the chicks in a chirping like motion. This is clearly conveyed by the woodwinds and the strings providing an ever-ascending scalar passage that adds to the tension. This leads directly into the most dramatic movement of the work.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle is attempting to demonstrate the different characters of the two portraits, one a rich man and one a poor beggar. The rich man is turned into a dramatic unison melody that is played by the clarinet, bassoon, violin, and double bass. While the poor beggar is conveyed by the flute and clarinet in a descending chromatic passage that sounds like a musical sigh. *Promenade: Con mortuis in lingua mortua* means the promenade melody is now being presented in a dead language, in this case literally as the title is written in Latin. This version is played by the woodwinds in a choral, similar to a choir chanting, while the strings and percussion provide a layer of suspense.

The most intense movement, *The Hut on Chicken Legs (Baba Yaga)*, is about an evil witch that likes to terrify children in the forest, similar to the witch in Hansel and Gretel. Though this witch's hut has one special feature, it stands upon chicken legs and is able to chase after unsuspecting, or, intruding children. The mood for this movement is set by the short descending rhythmic motive that is stated at the beginning. This melody feels frantic and harried.

The Great Gate of Kiev is the finale expression in this journey through the exhibition. The gate is grand and substantial and is musically represented by the entire ensemble playing in a choral, or as a choir. The trumpet takes the lead, as a reference back to the original *Promenade*, followed by a gentle, sad expression by the flute, clarinet, bassoon, and bass, before coming to a close final shimmering, bright close.

The Art Itself... you'll see these at the performance!

Here are pictures of the characters in this story:

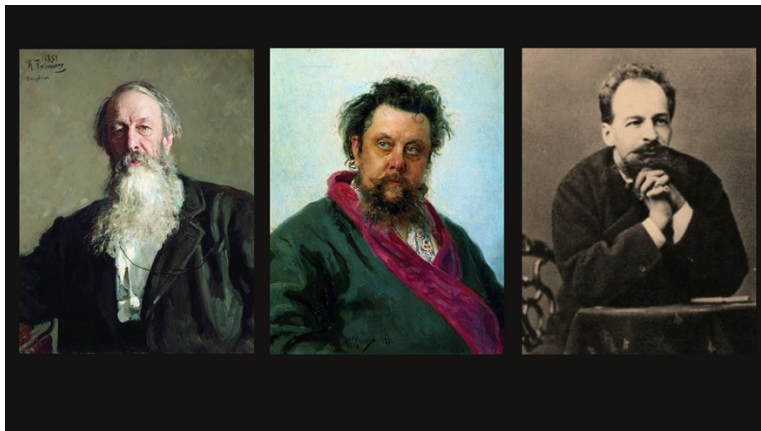
First, we have Vladimir, the writer.

Next, we have Modest, a composer, who writes music.

And last but not least we have Viktor Hartmann, an artist and architect.

The three of them like working together and care deeply what the others have to say.

Their friendship is integral to the story of this event!



After Hartman's unexpected and early death, Modest Mussorgsky attends an exhibit of his friend's artwork. The images below inspired him to write the music you'll be hearing at the performance!

Gnomus



The Old Castle



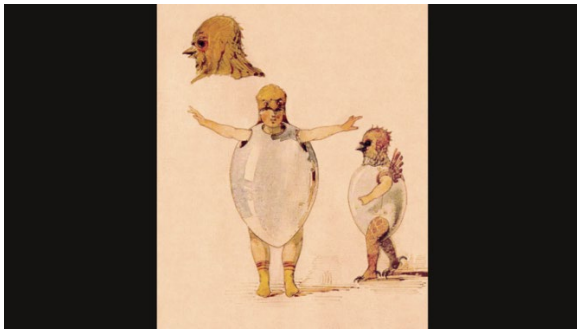
Tuileries



The Oxcart



Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks



Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle



The Hut on Chicken Legs (Baba Yaga)



The Great Gate of Kiev



Concluding Comments

Art is powerful. Whether visual, musical, performing, written, or other, art tells us stories that sometimes just cannot be told as powerfully any other way. And sometimes they teach us about a culture, a time. Sometimes art reflects the struggles of an individual or a group of people. But art is always reaching out to us, to speak to us about something worth considering.

Mussorgsky used his art – musical composition – to honor the visual art of his dear friend, and in that process, to heal himself from the loss of that friend. How beautiful is that that you, sitting in class 150 years later, are aware of Hartmann's art because of Mussorgsky's music? Powerful stories, impactful art has the power to teach us lessons well beyond the lifetimes of its creators. The art can lead us to the stories or the stories can lead us to the art.

When you listen to music in the future – or when you visit art galleries down the road – don't forget to explore the stories behind what you hear or what you see. Often things are not just what they seem at first listen or first glance; it's worth your while to dig deeper and learn the story. Your life will be richer, your experiences more beautiful if you take the time to listen to the story.

This program is supported in part by Michigan Humanities, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.