

Program Notes

Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 3

April 18, 2020

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30

Sergey Rachmaninov
1873-1943

Following the success of his Second Piano Concerto in 1901, Sergey Rachmaninov's career took off and evolved successfully in three directions. He continued to compose, including his Symphony No. 2 in 1906-07, he traveled extensively both at home and in Western Europe as a virtuoso pianist, and he was a sought-after conductor. He tried to apportion his time evenly among the three.

Rachmaninov composed the Piano Concerto No. 3 in 1909 for a long-planned first tour of the United States where he was going to be featured in the exhausting capacity of wearing all three hats. He was ambivalent about the tour and significantly pressed for time. He did not begin the Concerto until June, taking with him a silent keyboard on which he practiced assiduously during the crossing. The tour and the Concerto were an artistic and financial success. And just as Haydn had been wooed to make his permanent home in London after the success of his "Salomon," or "London," symphonies, both the Boston and Cincinnati Symphonies offered Rachmaninov their podiums. Ironically, in 1917, he was forced into exile, his fortune confiscated and his estate demolished during the violence of the Russian Revolution. He continued to tour the United States, primarily as pianist, and with the imminence of war in Europe in 1939, he eventually relocated with his family in Beverly Hills where he died.

The Concerto premiered on November 28, 1909 with the New York Orchestra under Walter Damrosch and was repeated two months later with the same orchestra under Gustav Mahler. Unfortunately, we know nothing of what transpired between these two giants. The Concerto gained immediate and enduring popularity, especially with pianists. It requires immense stamina from the soloist, and it attests as much to the composer's melodic inventiveness as to his outstanding pianistic abilities.

The opening movement is particularly rich in thematic material with new ideas and moods introduced throughout. Over the throbbing orchestra, the piano enters on the third measure with a sad melody in a narrow range, the melancholy mood prevailing throughout the elaborate development of the theme. The staccato second theme, introduced by the strings, is converted by the piano into a flowing lyrical, but dark, melody. The extremely long written-out cadenza takes nearly a third of the entire movement and is briefly joined halfway through first by a flute, then

by the other woodwinds. Finally, the opening theme returns and the movement concludes in a whisper.

A languid theme on the oboe opens the Intermezzo, followed with a variation by the orchestra and finally by the soloist. The orchestra and piano continue in numerous permutations and variations, including a faster and livelier waltz-like variation that brightens the mood towards the end of the movement. But the opening mood returns in the coda.

The Finale follows without interruption with a sudden shift in mood and an exuberant display of pianistic brilliance. The movement is episodic with contrasting sections and, again, a wealth of themes and a broad romantic melody to announce the conclusion.

Pictures at an Exhibition
(Orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)

Modest Musorgsky
1839-1881

Modest Musorgsky, one of the wild cards of nineteenth century Russian music, left very few completed scores by the time of his early death from alcoholism. Of his meager output, the operas *Boris Godunov* and the uncompleted *Khovanshchina*, some songs, the short orchestral score *St. John's Night on Bald Mountain* and the piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*, have stood the test of time. Although *Boris* and *St. John's Night* are most often heard in Nikolay Rimsky Korsakov's "corrected" form, they now are considered among the highlights of Russian music. Musorgsky was a member of the "Mighty Five" – together with Mily Balakirev, Aleksander Borodin, Cesar Cui and Rimsky-Korsakov – whose goal was to further the pan-Slavic movement and Russian nationalist music.

In July 1873 Musorgsky's close friend, the young architect and painter Victor Gartman, died suddenly. The following year a posthumous showing of his drawings, paintings and designs was presented in St. Petersburg. The fantastic and bizarre elements of much of Gartman's work fascinated Musorgsky, who set out to create a musical memorial to his friend in the form of a suite of piano pieces. He depicted his impressions of ten of the pictures, portraying himself as the observer in the Promenade that introduces the work and serves as connector between the tableaux.

A striking aspect of the suite is the nearly complete absence of any subjective emotion in a work directly inspired by a great personal loss. Musorgsky gives us his personal impressions of Gartman's art, but rarely of his feelings about Gartman's death. Even in the Promenade, strolling from picture to picture, he usually portrays a cool, objective viewer rather than a grieving friend.

There is no evidence that Musorgsky ever planned to orchestrate the suite, although many of the pieces stretch the piano to its limits, crying out for orchestration. The score was not published

until five years after the composer's death, at which point other composers started its long history of orchestrated versions. The first arranger was Mikhail Tushmalov in 1890, followed by Sir Henry Wood, Lucien Cailliet, Leopold Stokowski, Vladimir Ashkenazy and others. But the most popular and by far the most successful arrangement is by Maurice Ravel, commission 1922 by the conductor Sergey Koussevitzky.

One of the most striking features of Musorgsky's piano version, further enhanced by Ravel's orchestration, is the vivid tone painting that enables the listener to actually visualize the painting. And it's a good thing too since the originals of some of Gortman's works upon which the suite is based are lost.

The musical "exhibition" comprises the "Promenade" and musical renditions of ten pictures:

1. *Gnomus*: A sketch of a little gnome on crooked legs, said to be a design for a nutcracker.
2. *Il vecchio castello*: A medieval castle before which a troubadour sings a love song. The mournful sound of the alto saxophone was Ravel's stroke of genius.
3. *Tuileries*: Children quarreling and nurses shouting on a path in the Tuileries garden in Paris.
4. *Bydlo*: A Polish oxcart with enormous wheels is heard in the distance as it approaches, passes and gradually disappears again.
5. *Ballet of chicks in their shells*: A design for a scene for the ballet *Trilby*; the orchestra imitates the pecking birds.
6. *Two Polish Jews*: One rich, the other poor. No picture by Gortman corresponding to this tableau has ever been found. The subtitle "Samuel Goldenburg and Schmuyle" is a late addition, not by Musorgsky. Ravel uses the basses and a solo muted trumpet to represent the two characters.
7. *The Marketplace of Limoges*: Chattering strings imitate French women haggling violently in the market.
8. *Catacombs*: A sudden, grim shift of mood transports the listener into the catacombs in Paris illuminated by lantern light with the figure of Gortman himself in the shadows.
- 8a. "*Cum mortuis in lingua mortua*" ("With the dead in a dead language"): The Promenade, in the minor mode, constitutes the second part of the *Catacombs*.
9. *The Hut on Fowl's Legs*: Baba-Yaga, the hideous crone of Russian folklore, who lives in a hut supported on fowl legs and flies around in an iron mortar was Gortman's design for the face of a clock.
10. *The Great Gate of Kiev*: Gortman's design for a memorial gate in Kiev in honor of Tsar Alexander II. The design is in the massive Old Russian style, topped by a cupola in the shape of the helmet of the old Slavic warriors. Musorgsky portrayed the quintessential deep Russian church bells at the bottom of the keyboard; Ravel employs low brass, harps and percussion in the bass with woodwinds and strings for the faster bells.

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