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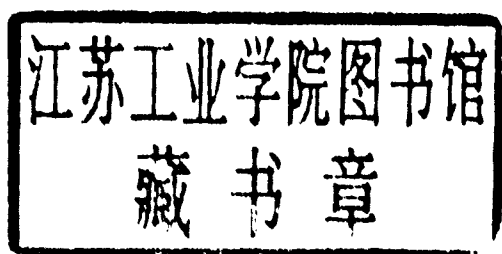
MICHAEL RUSS

Musorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition*



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Illustrations

Between pages 49 and 50

- 1 V. Hartman. Canary Chicks in their Shells; a costume sketch for Gerber's ballet *Trilbi*. Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House), USSR Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg.
- 2 V. Hartman. A Rich Jew in a Fur Hat. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
- 3 V. Hartman. A Poor Jew. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
- 4 V. Hartman. Paris Catacombs (including Hartman, V. Kenel and guide with lantern). State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.
- 5 V. Hartman. Baba-Yaga's Hut on Hen's Legs. Sketch for a clock in Russian style. Manuscript Department of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library, St Petersburg.
- 6 V. Hartman. Design for Kiev City Gate: Main Façade. Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House), USSR Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg.

Preface

In his study of Musorgsky written in the years coming up to the Second World War, M. D. Calvocoressi says of *Pictures at an Exhibition*: 'the whole suite ... is an attractive but not particularly significant work'. Such a remark might surprise us today when this piece is perhaps the most popular of Musorgsky's compositions. But there is sense in what Calvocoressi says; after all, is not this just a collection of ten rather brief and not terribly idiomatic piano pieces separated by little interludes? Similar collections of pieces by other composers are generally considered in a lesser light than their symphonic, chamber and operatic output; why should a book be devoted to Musorgsky's *Pictures*?

The answer lies both in the unique conception of the original work and its unparalleled history at the hands of editors and transcribers. Indeed, most of us first come to *Pictures* in Ravel's orchestration of Rimsky-Korsakov's version of Musorgsky's text. There is no other instrumental work like this one with its social messages from nineteenth-century Russia, its saturation in folk music and culture, and its innovative harmonic language all wrapped up in an alluringly colourful exterior. No other work has attracted so many orchestrators of such high calibre and yet left us with the feeling that the 'perfect' orchestration is beyond the grasp of any of them; no other nineteenth-century work raises so acutely the issue of authenticity and the question of what it is morally acceptable to do to another man's composition.

Musorgsky's *Pictures* warrant book-length treatment because of the myriad issues that surround them. To understand them fully we must know something about Musorgsky's artistic philosophy and matters such as Populism and realism and about the illustrations and their artist, Victor Hartman. One can enjoy Musorgsky's *Pictures* as pure music in Ravel's superbly crafted orchestration. But if ever there was a work where one benefits from knowledge of the stimuli that led to its creation and of the layers of meaning that the composer places on top of the original pictures it is this one. In a recent interview, Vladimir Ashkenazy, a pianist and conductor with a particular affinity for this work, who has produced his own orchestration,

described the Russian mind as 'suspicious'; it never takes the obvious meaning, it always looks for something deeper. So it must be when we look at Musorgsky's *Pictures*. These little pieces do not simply turn Hartman's illustrations and designs into music, they bring them to life, creating little scenes out of them which, in turn, may carry messages about Russian culture and society.

Above all, this is Russian music. Although not all of the pictures are set in Russia, Musorgsky views them all from a Russian perspective, and the innovative qualities of the work have their roots in Russian soil. Partly for this reason, and also because for Musorgsky the communication of his message in a direct but artistic way is all important, we should not judge this piece by German standards of technical sophistication. The complex harmonic, contrapuntal and formal procedures of German music have no place here, since they might draw attention to themselves and detract from the matters under expression (something that Ravel's orchestration also does). Musorgsky's failure to use these techniques in a thoroughgoing, grammatically correct way has little to do with ignorance and poor training but everything to do with what he was trying to achieve.

Students of this work will have noticed that its Russian title 'Kartinki s vystavki' is either translated as 'Pictures *at* an Exhibition' or as 'Pictures *from* an Exhibition'. The latter title is a more exact translation of the Russian, but since the former is more often found we retain it here, usually abbreviated to *Pictures*.

In spelling the names of Russian musicians the transliterations are those in *The New Grove*. For the name Hartman the single 'n' at the end corresponds to the single character in the original cyrillic. Dates given in two forms recognise that the Russians continued to use the Julian calendar which, in the nineteenth century, lagged twelve days behind the Gregorian one used in the West. In quotations which give only one date it is the old system (O. S.). The full titles and various subtitles of each piece are given in Chapter 5. In the remainder of the book the obvious abbreviated forms are used. Bar numbers correspond to those in Schandert and Ashkenazy's Vienna Urtext Edition, which is the only edition I recommend (see Chapter 3; the next best edition is Hellmundt's Urtext, published by Peters, Leipzig). In discussing some of the orchestrations, cuts and alterations necessitate referring to rehearsal figures.

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Hartman's designs for 'Chicks' and 'The Great Gate at Kiev' are reproduced from copies kindly made available by the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in St Petersburg. Translations of extracts from Musorgsky's letters and documents are reprinted by kind permission of publishers Da Capo Press and University Microfilms International.

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*'Pictures at an Exhibition' and
nineteenth-century music*

Modest Musorgsky (1839–81) composed *Pictures at an Exhibition* in 1874. Apart from the orchestral tone poem *St John's Night on the Bare Mountain*, it is his only substantial instrumental composition. Musorgsky's *Pictures* makes a unique contribution to the golden age of European piano music, an age brought about by steady advances in piano technology and the dissemination of virtuosi, instruments and teachers throughout Europe. During the first half of the nineteenth century many foreign pianists and teachers came to the cosmopolitan capital, St Petersburg, notably Clementi (who established a piano warehouse), Field and Henselt. But it was not until the dying years of the century that a Russian piano school of native composers and performers emerged. During the first three-quarters of the century only two very different masterworks, Balakirev's Lisztian *Islamey* and Musorgsky's in some ways unplanistic *Pictures* stand out.

Musorgsky, able to perform a concerto by Field at the age of nine, began piano lessons with his mother. On being sent to school in St Petersburg from 1849 to 1853 he took lessons with the best teacher in the city, the Pole Anton Herke. Herke, a pupil of Henselt, introduced Musorgsky to a wide range of European piano music and turned him into an excellent pianist.

After preparatory school Musorgsky entered the Guards' cadet school where debauchery rather than serious academic study was the order of the day and the seeds of the alcoholism that later killed him were sown. The scholarly Musorgsky was out of the ordinary, spending much time studying philosophy, history and foreign languages: the latter being reflected in the variety of languages employed in *Pictures*. Musorgsky entered the Preobrazhensky Guards in 1856 having already composed his *Porte-Enseigne Polka* and sketched an opera. That he knew little of musical theory was of small consequence since, for the handsome Guards' officer, pianism and an ability to compose trivial miniatures was all that was required for an entry into fashionable society.

Musorgsky lived nearly all his life in St Petersburg; despite the foreign

locations of several pieces in *Pictures* he never left his native land. Foreign composers, notably purveyors of Italian opera, dominated the 'serious' Russian musical scene in the city until the 1860s. There were orchestral and choral concerts of music by the German 'greats' but orchestral players were either from the theatre pits or amateurs and, for a time, concerts were only allowed during Lent when the Imperial theatres were closed. Opportunities for performing orchestral works by Russian composers were rare and it was in the opera house that they began to make their mark.

As a young Guards' officer, Musorgsky was fortunate in being introduced into the salon of Dargomizhsky, and to Mili Balakirev (1837–1910). Musorgsky's senior by just two years, Balakirev had, through a rare capacity for self-education, managed to overcome the difficulties posed by the lack of formal musical training and from the age of twenty was advising aspiring Russian composers. He took Musorgsky under his wing playing duet arrangements of works by Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Glinka and others with him and discussing and analysing their structure. The Balakirev circle were intent on creating a new Russian music building on the innovations of Glinka, commonly regarded as the father of Russian music.

The dogmatic, obstinate Balakirev gave advice harshly and emphasised innovativeness, originality and the pragmatic acquisition of skills. His first reactions to Musorgsky were guarded and these early doubts persisted because the two men were on different artistic wavelengths. Musorgsky had little interest in, or talent for, extended instrumental composition. He was to find his true genius in realistic vocal works. His only major piano work was not to be a sonata, but the loosely arranged collection of descriptive pieces that form the subject of this book. Balakirev only encouraged Musorgsky to write instrumental, symphonic, sonata-form compositions. Musorgsky's Allegro in C for piano duet of 1858, his only piece in sonata form, is not a success. Of much more significance for Musorgsky was Balakirev's interest in folk music and his ability to use it to transform his own musical language in an innovative and original way. Certain harmonic influences of Balakirev can be identified in Musorgsky's weaker piano pieces, but *Pictures*, written when their paths had diverged, is largely free of Balakirevian fingerprints.

By 1862 Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov had been brought together as 'The Five', the Balakirev circle, or the 'Mighty Handful' as Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906) dubbed them. Balakirev became their leader and Stasov their artistic adviser. 'The Five' represent the difficulties faced by Russian composers particularly well. With the exception of Balakirev they were all aristocratic amateurs dabbling in composition,

without professional training, something for which they were criticised by their contemporaries in the St Petersburg Conservatory.

Stasov prompted and guided Musorgsky throughout his life and is the dedicatee of *Pictures*. 'To you Généralissime, the sponsor of the Hartman Exhibition in remembrance of our dear Victor, June 27, 74' is written slantwise in the corner of the title page of Musorgsky's autograph. Stasov worked in the art department of the St Petersburg Public Library. His secure income and access to materials in this post put him in a position to influence profoundly the course of Russian music and art in the second half of the nineteenth century through criticism, writing, reviewing and personal contact. The title 'Généralissime' (he was also known as a 'pusher' (tolkatel) and a 'spurrer' (shpora))¹ reflects Stasov's influence and energetic character, ever pushing on the artists he adopted and providing them with ideas and materials. Stasov first met Musorgsky in 1857, but like Balakirev had thought little of him. Only in the 1870s did he come to realise that Musorgsky's work was the musical embodiment of the views he espoused. From this point on he typically, as with other artists who gained his support, became an almost overly enthusiastic supporter.

Stasov had travelled through Europe and knew the best and most progressive of its culture including the music of Schumann, Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner (Stasov and the rest of the Balakirev circle despised the latter). For him, native art had to develop not only by incorporating folk-inspired Russianness, but also by achieving the high artistic standards, and the sophistication and progressiveness of structure apparent in Western music. As a critic he sought to explain, educate and reveal meaning in the service of art for the people, art with a social conscience and message. Such is the intention of his remarks on *Pictures* discussed in later chapters.

Genre

Musorgsky's *Pictures* is a collection of short pieces, free from sonata form and demonstrating the power of folk music to transform rather than decorate the musical language. In a sense it brings on to a higher plane the mixture of tiny piano pieces he played with his mother and also in the salons of St Petersburg, and the folk music he heard in the countryside. His style is often rough-hewn and totally free from academicism, owing nothing to the purely musical sensitivity and elegance of composers like Field. His mode of expression is original, individual and direct; whatever the pianistic abilities of the composer, the medium is subservient to the message.

In his self-portrait Musorgsky records that as a 'relaxation' from his work on the operas *Khovanshchina* and *Sorochintsy Fair*, he composed an 'Album Series on the genius architect Hartman'.² An 'Album Series' is among the loosest of musical genres. The word 'album', as well as its appropriate association with the visual arts, implies randomness, slightness, even scrappiness, and a freedom to select what one wishes. This places *Pictures* among the many collections of piano miniatures assembled by nineteenth-century composers as diverse as Field, Schumann, Smetana, Grieg and the master of the miniature, Chopin. As such, it is part of the move away from the German-dominated sonata principle towards the expression of personal, social and nationalistic concerns, and the translation of poetic into musical utterances in small forms like the nocturne, study, prelude or album leaf.

While the appellation 'Album Series' is correct in the sense that the pieces are colourful, some are slight and their structure results from descriptive impulse, it does the work an injustice. *Pictures* is a more coherent whole than Musorgsky suggests. There is the recurring 'Promenade' theme and an overall sense of movement towards the final climax in 'Kiev'. The key-scheme, together with harmonic and motivic characteristics, binds the diverse pieces together and gives them a sense of unity and purpose (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, 'Baba-Yaga' and 'Kiev' are more substantial than album leaves in length and power of expression. It is better to assign *Pictures* to the same genre as piano cycles like Schumann's *Papillons*³ and *Carnaval*. There are structural parallels between the latter work and *Pictures*. Both contain a sequence of short, simply structured pieces with diverse imagery leading to a lengthier and more triumphant final piece. *Carnaval* lacks any equivalent of Musorgsky's punctuating 'Promenades' but does include a single piece of that title; Musorgsky's motivic links are not as strongly integrating as Schumann's 'ASCH'. Schumann's translation of poetic fantasies and visual images into music was to have a particular attraction for the Russians. Herke introduced Schumann's music to Musorgsky who was among the first of the Russians to appreciate it. Nevertheless, Schumann and Musorgsky are highly divergent. In Musorgsky structure is subordinate to content and Russianness in a way that Schumann's respect for a pure musical language would never allow.

As the nineteenth century progressed a wider range of piano textures became available and standards of performance were improved, matching the composer's need for greater expressive resources. Liszt, who visited St Petersburg in 1842 and 1843, played a crucial role in these developments. Herke's performance of *Totentanz* in 1866 had a strong effect on Musorgsky,

and Liszt is the only composer whose piano textures may be traced in *Pictures*. His technique of thematic transformation had an effect too. Other than the faintest traces of Glinka and Balakirev, *Pictures* is remarkably free from the direct influence of other nineteenth-century composers. But in more general terms Musorgsky is a composer of his times in that he is pulled between organicism and the necessities of, in his case, nationalistic and realistic expression with its tendency towards fragmentation and discontinuity. Realistic description in *Pictures* is tempered by the desire for integration through key-schemes, motivic relationships and the recurrences of the 'Promenade' theme. The phrase-structure favours highly periodic two- and four-bar units which then tend to fragment. Romantic too are his interests in folk materials, in delving into the mists of the past, his fascination with the fantastic and his interest in the Jews. However, Musorgsky's feet were firmly anchored in Russian soil; he would not have shared the German Romantic view of the artist as a superhuman, transcendental figure.

Nineteenth-century Russian piano music

The keyboard was the least favoured medium for expressing the nationalistic feelings of the new Russian school. Piano music belonged to the salon or represented Germanic concerns with formalism, development and those things which impeded the creation of a genuinely Russian music. There is little Russian piano music of any substance from the first half of the nineteenth century. Glinka put his energies principally into opera; his contributions to the piano literature are mainly slight mazurkas, waltzes and other salon pieces. Of the composers of the 'Mighty Handful' only Balakirev, a virtuoso pianist, stands out as a composer of piano music developing a 'piano style ... from Hummel, Clementi, Weber and Field to Chopin and Liszt'.⁴ His best piano work is the highly idiomatic, unrepentantly virtuosic tone poem for piano *Islamey* (a piece Liszt kept in his repertoire) with its exotic colours, some deriving from Caucasian folk music. Parallelism and modal inflection reflect Balakirev's use of folk music to transform his own musical language. His ornamentation and exotic chromaticism finds little place in Musorgsky's *Pictures*: only in 'Goldenberg' do we find a trace of it. Of Balakirev's other piano music the best dates from after Musorgsky's *Pictures*. Significant piano works by other members of 'The Five', Rimsky-Korsakov's influential Piano Concerto and Borodin's *Petite Suite*, did not appear until the 1880s.

Apart from *Pictures*, Musorgsky's piano music is slight and often derivative, bearing hallmarks of Schumann, Mendelssohn, Balakirev and Chopin.

Musorgsky's piano music as a whole is a mixture of travel impressions, comic pieces and scenes from Russian life in much the way that *Pictures* is. Of the early pieces, the *Porte-Enseigne Polka* of 1852 is surprisingly accomplished and pianistic. Better music comes in three Schumannesque pieces from the end of the 1850s. As always Musorgsky improves when scenes and people are involved. The *Impromptu passionné* (1859) is dedicated to his close friend Nadezhda Opochinina and based on two characters in a Herzen novel. *A Children's Prank* (1859) is an early example of Musorgsky writing music on a children's scene. The *Intermezzo* 'in modo classico' (1860–61), a 'post-Schumann pre-Mahler Russianized bucolic Ländler',⁵ was later entitled 'A Difficult Path through Snowdrifts', since, as Musorgsky related to Stasov, it was inspired by 'young peasant women, singing and laughing as they walked along an even path' in contrast to other peasants who fell repeatedly into drifts.⁶ In 1867 a Trio was added and the piece orchestrated. The piece has an unmistakably Russian theme which is subjected to an uncharacteristically Germanic working-out (hence the 'in modo classico' in the title). Conventional but well written for piano, these three pieces and *The Seamstress* (1871), a rapid, pianistic scherzino, are the best of Musorgsky's piano music other than *Pictures*.

The pieces from the end of his life show a decline in quality. These include two Crimean studies resulting from his tour to southern Russia with the singer Leonova in 1879 (a further piece, *Storm on the Black Sea*, that Musorgsky reputedly played during this tour has either disappeared or was never written down). *Méditation* and *Une Larme* (both 1880) are salon-like album leaves. The famous *Hopak* (also 1880) is a transcription from *Sorochintsy Fair*. *Au village*, his final piece for piano, is more inventive and colourful. Its Russian Orthodox harmonisation of the initially unaccompanied folk-like melody is reminiscent of 'Kiev' and, like most of Musorgsky's late piano music, has traces of Orientalism.

The rich profusion of Russian piano music in the final years of the nineteenth century owes little to Musorgsky's *Pictures*. The line of pianists and pianist-composers that includes Rakhmaninov and Skryabin originated in the establishment of the St Petersburg and, particularly, the Moscow conservatories during the 1860s, and in the work of Anton and Nikolay Rubinstein. During the 1860s and early 70s there was great rivalry between the men of the St Petersburg Conservatory (among whose first graduates were Tchaikovsky and Vasily Bessel, first publisher of *Pictures*) and the Balakirev circle who thought the conservatory training placed too much emphasis on Western techniques and employed too many foreign teachers.⁷ But Rimsky-Korsakov's appointment

to the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1871 eventually linked the camps. Musorgsky's realistic scene painting would have held little attraction for the new generation of professional, trained musicians who would have considered *Pictures* to be crude and technically flawed. Rakhmaninov and Skryabin were to prefer abstract forms and in Skryabin's later piano music the experimental harmonic language pushed his music towards atonality and expressionism, connecting him more closely with developments in German music than with Musorgsky.

Pictures is a truly Russian work in its directness of expression, its form arising from content and summing of parts rather than organic growth. There is rhythmic drive, excitement, colourfulness; these too are Russian characteristics, as is the use of harmony to support and give colour and weight to lines rather than to control functionally. Musorgsky prefers to depict real life rather than the spiritual, romantic, sensuous or erotic. Less obvious is the need for the listener to probe beneath the surface, to look for concealed layers of meaning, which if not perceived leave the work seeming naive.

Nationalism and Populism

'I feel a certain regeneration; everything Russian seems suddenly near to me.'⁸ Musorgsky's oft-quoted words (in a letter to Balakirev 23 June/5 July 1859 describing his reactions to his first visit to Moscow) indicated the onset of nationalism in his music. From then on evocations of Russian scenes in song and opera, and the close imitation of Russian modes of speech formed the backbone of his artistic production. But nationalism is far too broad a term to characterise Musorgsky. He is far from the Czechs Dvořák and Smetana and even from all his compatriots. Not only was his musical language more radical and his rejection of German technique more extensive, but also the subject matter with which he was concerned reflected social and philosophical thought in his country far more than was the case with his contemporaries. So while all the composers of the Balakirev circle and Tchaikovsky may be regarded as nationalists, only Musorgsky intensifies this nationalism by becoming a true popularist and realist. We must look for evidence of all these movements in *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Musorgsky is often regarded by Soviet commentators as a 'man of the sixties'. In the 1840s and 50s Russian intellectuals had taken two divergent paths towards the establishment of a native culture. The Westernisers (whose musical representatives were Anton Rubinstein and the men of the St Petersburg Conservatory) thought Russians should learn from the West; the