

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN B-FLAT MINOR, OP. 23 (1875)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto is scored for pairs of woodwinds, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. The performance time is 32 minutes. The Grant Park Orchestra first performed the Concerto on July 29, 1942, Rudolph Ganz conducting; Thaddeus Kozuch was the soloist.



These days, when the music of Tchaikovsky is among the most popular in the repertory, it is difficult to imagine the composer as a young man, known only to a limited public, and trying valiantly to solve that most pressing of all problems for the budding artist — making a living. In 1874, he was teaching at the Moscow Conservatory and writing music criticism for a local journal. These duties provided a modest income, but Tchaikovsky's real interest lay in composition, and he was frustrated with the time they took from his creative work. He had already stolen enough hours to produce a sizeable body of music, but only *Romeo and Juliet* and the Symphony No. 2 had raised much enthusiasm. At the end of the year, he began a piano concerto with the hope of having a success great enough to allow him to leave his irksome post at the Conservatory. By late December, he had largely sketched out the work, and, having only a limited technique as a pianist, he sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, Director of the Moscow Conservatory and an excellent player. Tchaikovsky reported the interview in a letter:

"On Christmas Eve 1874 ... Nicholai asked me ... to play the Concerto in a classroom of the Conservatory. We agreed to it.... I played through the first movement. Not a criticism, not a word. Rubinstein said nothing.... I did not need any judgment on the artistic form of my work; there was question only about its mechanical details. This silence of Rubinstein said much. It said to me at once: 'Dear friend, how can I talk about details when I dislike your composition as a whole?' But I kept my temper and played the Concerto through. Again, silence.

"'Well?' I said, and stood up. There burst forth from Rubinstein's mouth a mighty torrent of words. He spoke quietly at first; then he waxed hot, and at last he resembled Zeus hurling thunderbolts. It appeared that my Concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable; passages were so commonplace and awkward that they could not be improved; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar. I had stolen this from that one and that from this one; so only two or three pages were good for anything, while the others should be wiped out or radically rewritten. I cannot produce for you the main thing: the tone in which he said all this. An impartial bystander would necessarily have believed that I was a stupid, ignorant, conceited note-scratcher, who was so impudent as to show his scribble to a celebrated man."

Tchaikovsky was furious, and stormed out of the classroom. He made only one change in the score: he obliterated the name of the original dedicatee — Nikolai Rubinstein — and substituted that of the virtuoso pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky's piano pieces across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and wrote a letter of praise to Tchaikovsky as soon as he received the score: "The ideas are so original, so powerful; the details are so interesting, and though there are many of them they do not impair the clarity and unity of the work. The form is so mature, so ripe and distinguished in style; intention and labor are everywhere concealed. I would weary you if I were to enumerate all the characteristics of your work, characteristics which compel me to congratulate equally the composer and those who are destined to enjoy it."

After the scathing criticism from Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky was delighted to receive such a response, and was further gratified when Bülow asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour. The Concerto created such a sensation when it was first heard, in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season. Such a success must at first have puzzled Rubinstein, but eventually he and Tchaikovsky reconciled their differences over the work. Tchaikovsky incorporated some of his suggestions in the 1889 revision, and Rubinstein not only accepted the Concerto, but eventually made it one of the staples of his performing repertory. During the next four years, when Tchaikovsky wrote *Swan Lake*, the *Rococo Variations*, the Third and Fourth Symphonies, the Violin Concerto, and, in 1877, met his benefactress Nadezhda von Meck, he was not only successful enough to leave his teaching job to devote himself entirely to composition, but he also became recognized as one of the greatest composers of the day.

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto opens with the familiar theme of the introduction, a sweeping melody in D-flat major nobly sung by violins and cellos above thunderous chords from the piano. After a brief cadenza for the soloist, the theme — which is not heard again anywhere in the Concerto — is presented a second time in an even grander setting. Following a decrescendo and a pause, the piano presents the snapping main theme, in which the dark-hued nominal tonality of the work, B-flat minor, is finally achieved. (Tchaikovsky said that this curious first theme was inspired by a tune he heard sung by a blind beggar at a street fair.) Following a skillful discussion of the opening theme by piano and woodwinds, the clarinet announces the lyrical, bittersweet second theme. A smooth, complementary phrase is played by the violins. This comple-

mentary phrase and the snapping motive from the main theme are combined in the movement's impassioned development section. The recapitulation returns the themes of the exposition in altered settings. (The oboe is awarded the second theme here.) An energetic cadenza and a coda derived from the second theme bring this splendid movement to a rousing close.

The simplicity of the second movement's three-part structure (A-B-A) is augured by the purity of its opening — a languid melody wrapped in the silvery tones of the solo flute, accompanied by quiet, plucked chords from the strings. The piano takes over the theme, provides it with rippling decorations, and passes it on to the cellos. The center of the movement is of very different character, with a quick tempo and a swift, balletic melody. The languid theme and moonlit mood of the first section return to round out the movement.

The crisp rhythmic motive presented immediately at the beginning of the finale and then spun into a complete theme by the soloist dominates much of the last movement. In the theme's vigorous full-orchestra guise, it has much of the spirit of a robust Cossack dance. To balance the impetuous vigor of this music, Tchaikovsky introduced a contrasting theme, a romantic melody first entrusted to the violins. The dancing Cossacks repeatedly advance upon this bit of tenderness, which shows a hardy determination to dominate the movement. The two themes contend, but it is the flying Cossacks who have the last word to bring this Concerto to an exhilarating finish.

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION (1874; TRANSCRIBED 1923)

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Transcribed by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Pictures at an Exhibition, as orchestrated by Ravel, is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta and strings. The performance time 35 minutes. The Grant Park Orchestra first performed this work on July 8, 1953, Walter Hendl conducting.



Though the history of the Russian nation extends far back into the mists of time, the country's cultural life is of relatively recent origin. Russian interest in art, music and theater dates only from the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725), the powerful monarch who coaxed his country into the modern world by importing ideas, technology and skilled practitioners from western Europe. To fuel the nation's musical life, Peter, Catherine and their successors depended on a steady stream of well-compensated German, French and Italian artists who brought their latest tonal wares to the magnificent capital city of St. Petersburg. This tradition of imported music continued well into the 19th century: Berlioz, for example, enjoyed greater success in Russia than he did in his native France; Verdi composed *La Forza del Destino* on a commission from St. Petersburg, where it was first performed.

In the years around 1850, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping across Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive nationalist character for their works. Leading this movement was a group of composers known as "The Five," whose members included Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, César Cui and Mily Balakirev. Among the allies that The Five found in other fields was the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, with whom Mussorgsky became close personal friends. Hartmann's premature death at 39 stunned the composer and the entire Russian artistic community. Vladimir Stassov, a noted critic and the journalistic champion of the Russian arts movement, organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann's work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that showing that Mussorgsky conceived his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

At the time of the exhibit, Mussorgsky was engaged in preparations for the first public performance of his opera *Boris Godunov*, and he was unable to devote any time to his *Pictures* until early summer. When he took up the piece in June, he worked with unaccustomed speed. "'Hartmann' is bubbling over, just as Boris did," he wrote to a friend. "Ideas, melodies come to me of their own accord, like a banquet of music — I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to put them down on paper fast enough." The movements mostly depict sketches, watercolors and architectural designs shown publicly at the Hartmann exhibit, though Mussorgsky based two or three sections on canvases that he had been shown privately by the artist before his death. The composer linked his sketches together with a musical "Promenade" in which he depicted his own rotund self shuffling — in an uneven meter — from one picture to the next. Though Mussorgsky was not given to much excitement over his own creations, he took special delight in this one. Especially in the masterful transcription for orchestra that Maurice Ravel did in 1922 for the Parisian concerts of conductor Sergei Koussevitzky, it is a work of vivid impact to which listeners and performers alike can return with undiminished pleasure.

Promenade. According to Stassov, this recurring section depicts Mussorgsky "roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at

times sadly, thinking of his friend.”

The Gnome. Hartmann’s drawing is for a fantastic wooden nutcracker representing a gnome who gives off savage shrieks while he waddles about on short, bandy legs.

Promenade — The Old Castle. A troubadour (represented by the saxophone) sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress.

Promenade — Tuileries. Mussorgsky’s subtitle is “Dispute of the Children after Play.” Hartmann’s picture shows a corner of the famous Parisian garden filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges.

Bydlo. Hartmann’s picture depicts a rugged wagon drawn by oxen. The peasant driver sings a plaintive melody (solo tuba) heard first from afar, then close-by, before the cart passes away into the distance.

Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells. Hartmann’s costume design for the 1871 fantasy ballet *Trilby* shows dancers enclosed in enormous egg shells, with only their arms, legs and heads protruding.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle. The title was given to the music by Stassov. Mussorgsky originally called this movement “Two Jews: one rich, the other poor.” It was inspired by a pair of pictures which Hartmann presented to the composer showing two residents of the Warsaw ghetto, one rich and pompous (a weighty unison for strings and winds), the other poor and complaining (muted trumpet). Mussorgsky based both themes on incantations he had heard on visits to Jewish synagogues.

The Marketplace at Limoges. A lively sketch of a bustling market, with animated conversations flying among the female vendors.

Catacombs, Roman Tombs. Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua. Hartmann’s drawing shows him being led by a guide with a lantern through cavernous underground tombs. The movement’s second section, bearing the title “With the Dead in a Dead Language,” is a mysterious transformation of the *Promenade* theme.

The Hut on Fowl’s Legs. Hartmann’s sketch is a design for an elaborate clock suggested by Baba Yaga, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore who eats human bones she has ground into paste with her mortar and pestle. She also can fly through the air on her fantastic pestle, and Mussorgsky’s music suggests a wild, midnight ride.

The Great Gate of Kiev. Mussorgsky’s grand conclusion to his suite was inspired by Hartmann’s plan for a gateway for the city of Kiev in the massive old Russian style crowned with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic warrior’s helmet. The majestic music suggests both the imposing bulk of the edifice (never built, incidentally) and a brilliant procession passing through its arches. The work ends with a heroic statement of the *Promenade* theme and a jubilant pealing of the great bells of the city.

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Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso —

Allegro con spirito

Andantino semplice — Prestissimo

Allegro con fuoco

STEPHEN HOUGH

MUSSORGSKY
arr. RAVEL

Pictures at an Exhibition

Promenade — The Gnome

Promenade — The Old Castle

Promenade — Tuileries

Bydlo

Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle

The Marketplace at Limoges —

Catacombs, Roman Tombs

Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua

The Hut on Fowl's Legs —

The Great Gate of Kiev

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