

Modest Mussorgsky, like many Russian composers of the 19th century, was a patriot through and through. He embraced all things Russian, including art, philosophy, folklore, and of course music. He even rejected Western classical music training, devoting himself to a group of composers known as “The Mighty Five,” whose ideologies embraced the creation of distinctly Russian art music. A goal specific to Mussorgsky was to portray the speech and character of Russian people as realistically as possible. He thus focused his compositional efforts on the development of the Russian art song, which he indeed took to unprecedented levels. It is therefore ironic that his two most famous works are not for the voice: *Night on Bald Mountain* for orchestra and *Pictures at an Exhibition* for piano.

Pictures was born out of an inspiring trip to an art gallery in June of 1874. Mussorgsky’s close friend, Russian architect Victor Hartman, had died the previous year, and an exhibit of his work led Mussorgsky to envision a piece portraying himself “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 departed friend.” The work was finished in twenty days in a frenzy of musical inspiration. It is made up of 16 short tableaux, 5 of which (the Promenades) represent Mussorgsky walking through the gallery and 11 of which depict various paintings he saw along the way. Though the work did not achieve instant fame, it is now highly celebrated for its wonderful, memorable melodies and vivid portrayals of the characters in the paintings. The work also gained distinction through Ravel’s famous orchestration of it, composed in 1922.

**Promenade*: Each presentation of the *Promenade* differs depending on the mood of Mussorgsky’s gait while walking through the gallery. Its non-symmetric meter, alternating 5/4 and 6/4, gives it an expansive quality, and its folk-inspired melody transports the listener directly to Russia. This first iteration is direct and upbeat, perhaps conveying the excitement of the eager gallery attendee who has yet to see his first painting.

**Gnomus*: A “fantastic lame figure on crooked little legs” describes the character in this painting. The gnome stumbles, grimaces, cries, and moans, as dramatic gestures in the lower tessitura of the piano provide an evil, foreboding mood.

**Promenade*: Mussorgsky continues his walk, this time with the soft, sweet promenade melody in the left hand bestowing calmness and stability.

**The Old Castle*: A troubadour sings in front of a medieval castle. His sad song is in strophes, and a constant droning G# creates an ancient, lonely atmosphere.

**Promenade*: A stately presentation of the promenade carries Mussorgsky to the next painting, though it ends almost apologetically.

**The Tuileries*: Children play in the garden of the Tuileries with their nurse.

Cries and taunts pepper the atmosphere, which is light, owing to the high tessitura of the piano. A flirting melody in the middle gives way to a recap of the opening, and with that, the movement ends in a flutter.

**Bydlo*: Polish for “cattle,” *Bydlo* depicts the lumbering of an ox cart. Its low, weighty register is reminiscent of *Gnomus*. “With all force – always heavy” instructs Mussorgsky in the music.

**Promenade*: A sad, crying walk by Mussorgsky is presented here as he remembers his friend.

**Ballet of Unhatched Chicks*: The piano taps lightly in a high register to convey chicks rapping on their shells and shrieking as they emerge. Once they get out, they do a waddling dance.

**Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*: Two paintings, one of a rich Jewish man and one of a poor one, inspire the dialogue in this movement. The rich one, Goldenberg, is assertive and powerful, while the poor one, Schmuyle, whines mercilessly in a high voice, his teeth chattering. In the end, Goldenberg gives Schmuyle nothing but a flea in the ear.

**Promenade*: Extra doubling of the melody gives this last promenade statement a majestic feeling.

**A Market Place in Limoges*: Old women quarrel and bustle about at a fair in this scherzo in ternary form. The perpetual motion is punctuated throughout with their shouts and cries.

**Catacombs (Sepulcrum romanum)*: A large cage full of skulls rests on the edge of the painting. Static chords offer a sinister atmosphere rather than any sort of melody.

**Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua*: A nostalgic quote of the promenade melody appears with a haunting trill on top, yet at the end the heavens open up to slow, rising arpeggios.

**The Hut of Baba-Yaga*: Baba-Yaga is a character in Russian fairy tales who lives in a hut that can rotate to face each unfortunate passer-by. She captures and eats lost children, then covers her tracks with her broomstick. The rhythmic drive of the movement seems to depict her closing in on her next meal.

**The Bohatyr Gate of Kiev*: How appropriate for Mussorgsky to save his most majestic writing for the depiction of the gate to the ancient capital, Kiev. Bells ring and hymns play a feeling of homecoming, royal and patriotic. The writing is entirely orchestral and lavishly grandiose. The promenade melody makes one final appearance, perhaps suggesting Mussorgsky making his final walk, this time away from the gallery.