

Classical Music Appreciation—Introductory

Session 3 notes

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Tonight's agenda

Mussorgsky, Night on Bare Mountain
Mussorgsky, Pictures at an Exhibition
Sibelius, Karelia Suite
Wien, Serenade for Strings
Tchaikovsky, Capriccio Italien

Modeste Mussorgsky (1839-1881) (Russia) *Night on Bare Mountain*



The orchestral piece that has come to be known as *Night on Bare Mountain* (or Bald Mountain) has a long and rather confused history—but I'll give you the short version.

Mussorgsky apparently received a commission in 1860 to compose an opera, a whole act on the *Bare Mountain* (from Mengden's drama *The Witch*), which depicts (in Mussorgsky's words) "a witches' sabbath, separate episodes of wizards, triumphal march of all this scum, finale—glorification of the sabbath." He finished the score for the complete work in 1867. However, his mentor Balakirev¹ criticized his score so severely that Mussorgsky made no attempt to have it performed. It apparently received only one performance, in 1932, over 50 years after Mussorgsky's death.

The orchestral piece that remains is due to Rimsky-Korsakov, who completed and orchestrated many of Mussorgsky's compositions, including this one. It was first performed in 1886 in St. Petersburg, with Rimsky-Korsakov himself conducting.

The music itself is a very free fantasia on several recognizable themes, effectively portraying its subject matter. The bulk of the piece is fast and furious, with occasional calm descending briefly on the music, only to be overtaken again by menace and demonic mischief. Eventually a church bell sounds, heralding a serene and ghostly musical passage as the hosts of evil fade back into the night.

¹ A Russian composer who was highly esteemed in his time, though now remembered more as a mentor to younger composers than as a composer in his own right.

Modeste Mussorgsky (1839-1881) (Russia) *Pictures at an Exhibition*

The inspiration for *Pictures at an Exhibition* was an 1874 exhibition of watercolors and drawings by Mussorgsky's friend Victor Hartmann, who had died the previous year. Mussorgsky's original score was for piano only, which seems strange to those of us who have long known the piece in its very rich orchestration by Maurice Ravel.

We know that Mussorgsky, who died a week after his 42nd birthday, had a very serious drinking problem. The art of orchestration was definitely not one of his strengths—many of his works were reworked and orchestrated by others, notably Rimsky Korsakov. We don't really know what were his intentions with *Pictures*. Did he intend it as a piano piece from the beginning? Or was he too disorganized, drink impaired, or self-knowingly lacking in orchestration skills to attempt to express his musical vision through the full orchestra? The fact that his piano score for *Pictures* was not published until after his death suggests that he never regarded it as the finished article.

Each major passage of *Pictures* describes one of Hartmann's displayed works, and the passages themselves are often connected by the recurring "promenade" theme, which depicts the walk of the visitor as he moves from picture to picture. Notice how the promenade theme is varied each time it returns.

The pictures are:

1. (promenade)
2. *Gnomus* represents a nutcracker, this one in the form of a gnome with huge jaws
3. (promenade)
4. *The Old Castle* is haunting and mysterious, shrouded in near darkness. The quiet music aptly describes the mystery. What instrument is playing the theme here?
5. (promenade)
6. *The Tuileries* conveys the mischievous play of children at the famous gardens in Paris, long before the Tour de France ever passed that way.
7. no promenade! We go straight into...
8. *Bydlo*. "Bydlo" is a Polish word meaning an ox-drawn cart. This passage portrays an enormous oxcart rumbling down a country road while its driver sings a Russian folk song. What instrument is playing the theme here?
9. (promenade)
10. *Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells* is the shortest and most jocular of the set, with squawks from the newly hatched chicks that life may well have been better back in the shell
11. again no promenade. It's straight on with...
12. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*, which evokes the animated attempts of one impoverished Polish Jew to wheedle some "spare change" out of another, but wealthy, Polish Jew
13. the promenade stays on vacation. On to the next picture, which is..
14. *The Marketplace in Limoges*, which depicts the bickering and haggling of the shoppers and merchants
15. the promenade is still on vacation. We descend to...

16. *The Catacombs*. Eerie and threatening. A pile of skulls lies on the floor—enough to make your skin creep, but then...
17. the promenade returns to reassure us that we're not trapped after all. But wait—we're still under threat. Here comes...
18. *Baba Yaga*, a Russian witch who lives in a hut supported on four chicken feet, and who flies through the air in a mortar, propelling herself with the pestle she uses to grind up human bones for food. She eventually flies up into..
19. *The Great Gate of Kiev*. It's a pity, but there is no Great Gate of Kiev. Hartmann (who you'll recall was the creator of all these pictures) had entered a competition to design a great monument for Kiev. He didn't win the competition, but no matter because no Gate was ever built owing to of lack of funds. However, we're left with this monumental movement (with its monumental physical challenge for the brass section²) to conclude a very fine piece of music.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) (Finland) Karelia Suite



Sibelius selected the three movements of the Karelia Suite from a series of seven tableaux representing important moments in the history of Karelia, the now-absorbed province that forms the southeastern part of modern Finland. The tableaux themselves were written in 1893 for a pageant in Viipuri, Karelia's capital. The music is light in character, as suited the occasion, and reflects the character of the Finns popularly said to inhabit Karelia—a lively, sensitive people devoted to the folk myths of their province.

Intermezzo

Originally the third number in the series of tableaux, the *Intermezzo* depicts the Lithuanian Prince Narimont collecting tribute³ from the Karelian people. The movement is constructed in ABA form, preceded by an introduction that has horns hinting at the melody to come, and rounded out by a coda in similar vein. The trumpets are the stars of this movement, carrying the theme throughout the ABA body, aided and abetted for a short snatch by the woodwinds and later by the trombones. None of the strings get a crack at any melody for the entire movement⁴.

² Yes, the voice of experience.

³ As far as I can tell, "tribute" is a euphemism for taxes at best, protection money at worst.

⁴ All of which does a lot to explain why I (yes, yes—a trumpet player) like this piece so much.

Ballade

The fourth tableau originally included a vocalist who sang to Karl Knutsson⁵ in Viipuri Castle. However, in this three-movement suite Sibelius replaced the voice by instruments.

The construction of the movement may almost be regarded as a modified rondo. As in the first movement, a short introduction hints at the melody to come, which we'll call the A of the rondo form. Then comes another theme (B), after which the AB ideas are reprised. Notice the canon effects in the reprise of the B theme.

Now comes a new idea (C) in a darker and more serious mood. Theme A briefly reappears, but it's in the same mood and character as C and we might not recognize it if we don't pay close attention. Theme C is reprised to complete this section.

Finally comes another totally new idea (D) sung by English horn for a mere 24 bars before one last 8-bar reprise of A closes out the movement.

Alla Marcia

The fifth tableau represents the conqueror Pontus de la Gardie. It is a breezy march consisting of two contrasting sections played alternately—the first a spirited and happy-sounding affair for the strings, the second a more substantial and declarative statement from brass that displays affinity with the mood and themes of the opening movement. Canon effects can again be heard when the “happy” theme makes its first and subsequent reappearances.

The two themes alternate with increasing frequency until the work reaches a rather sudden and jubilant conclusion, with the happy theme having the triumphant last laugh.

Dag Wiren (1905-1986) (Sweden) Serenade in G major (for strings)



Dag Wiren, although chronologically a “modern” composer, rejected the dissonant and raucous styles favored by many of his contemporaries, instead setting out unashamedly to entertain and please with listener-friendly modern music. Although his musical output—ranging from commercial popular music (one of his songs was an entry to the Eurovision

⁵ King of Sweden, 1467-70.

Song Contest) to neoclassical works—was by no means small, the 1937 Serenade is the only one of his works to have retained a place in present-day repertoire.

The Serenade has four movements, ranging in length from just under 3 minutes to 4½ minutes. It thus comes in manageable pieces of similar length to that of a popular song. The movements are:

- Allegro molto (very fast)
- Andante espressivo (moderately slow, expressive)
- Scherzo and Trio
- March

Allegro

[1]The movement opens with the violins singing a soaring theme above an accompaniment that sounds as if it's racing to get somewhere. [2]The lower strings then introduce a contrasting staccato theme, which is eventually taken up by the violins. [3]After a modulating (key changing) bridge passage, [4]the opening soaring theme reappears and is passed around the orchestra before being finally reclaimed by the violins. [5]This reprise is now heard in counterpoint with the staccato theme in the lower strings, and the movement comes to a close.

Andante espressivo

[6]In spite of its “expressivo” label, the movement opens with a pizzicato theme of sorts, which soon settles down and becomes the underlying accompaniment for the “expressivo” lyrical theme introduced by the violas. Wren employs elements of this theme as he develops variants and modulations around it, interweaving it with the still-progressing pizzicato accompaniment. [7]We hear the lyrical theme being played against itself in canon, a device we also heard in the opening movement.

Scherzo and Trio

[8]The Scherzo and Trio is a form typically employed as the second or third movement of a symphony. Here, we hear a complete scherzo and trio in the space of less than three minutes. The Scherzo (it's the Italian word for “joke”) is a light-hearted theme in triple time. [9]The “trio”⁶ refers to a contrasting passage, usually slower and calmer than the scherzo, which follows. After the trio, [10]the scherzo returns. Notice that here again Wren employs the canon technique with the scherzo theme.

March

The march movement is a typical march structure, played at the standard 120 beats per minute. Like the scherzo, a march almost always has (as does this one) a “trio” section, a contrasting and more lyrical section than the opening, which is typically more rhythmic and forceful.

⁶ The term “trio” originated way back in the early Baroque period (17th century), when it was customary for a dance suite's contrasting middle movement to be played by three solo instruments.

Peter Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) (Russia) Capriccio Italien



Capriccio Italien was inspired by Tchaikovsky's vacation in Rome, at the time of the Roman Carnival. Music filled the air, and Tchaikovsky couldn't help but write some of it down. Tchaikovsky's hotel was very close to a military barracks, and the bugle call he heard every evening became the opening tune of his capriccio. What follows is a tightly integrated succession of some of the melodies Tchaikovsky captured from his holiday, together with some of his own composed in the same style. The tarantella known in Italy as the Ciccuzza concludes the piece in a dazzling flourish.

As you might guess, *capriccio* is the Italian word for *caprice*, which means an impulsive change of mind, or an inclination for such behavior. Thus, to label a piece of music a "capriccio" is perhaps a euphemism for "there's no particular form here, I just made it up as I went along."