

Mussorgsky The Exhibitionist

A member of The Five, also known as The Mighty Handful, Modest Mussorgsky was one of the most creative Russian composers of the Romantic Era. He expressed a genuinely imaginative gift and strong passion for musical endeavors at an early age and his love for Russian fairy tales bled into his compositions. Over the course of his life, he met several titans of Russian culture, all of whom inspired him. He created a great variety of memorable pieces, such as *Songs and Dances of Death* and *Boris Godunov*. His most stunning piece, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, paved the road for his success as a composer. Written for his friend, Viktor Hartmann, *Pictures* serves as an example of mastery over vivid Romantic story-telling that, stemming from his life's experiences, both defied traditional musical techniques of its era and brought about a whole new meaning to musical art.

Born in March of 1839 in the small village of Karevo, Modest Mussorgsky was the youngest son of Peter Mussorgsky and Julia Chirikova.¹ Little is known about his early childhood other than the details provided in his autobiography. One thing was certain, however; he demonstrated not only a passionate love for music but also a natural talent for musical performance. Even before he started to dedicate his life to the study of music, Mussorgsky drew inspiration from his family's lovely estate. As a child, his nurse shared Russian fairy tales with him, which stoked the fire of his imagination. He also listened to many Russian folk songs.² He spent much of his childhood studying people and his surroundings and sought to bring the unique nature of humanity and the environment into his music. Seeing his observant personality, his mother taught him how to play piano. At age seven, he had learned to play several of Liszt's

¹ Lipschutz, Isabelle Ganz. "A Study of the Songs of Modest Mussorgsky" Ph.D. diss. University of Houston ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (1968): 5.

² Lipschutz 6.

smaller pieces and at age eleven, he gave a performance of a concerto by Field for a large audience.³ In fact, many musical parties occurred at Mussorgsky's estate after this point.⁴

His father, who also worshipped music, found himself quite fascinated with Mussorgsky's incredible advancements. He wished to cultivate his youngest son's musical gift, so he decided to enroll his son in a school dedicated to musical studies. He brought Mussorgsky to Petersburg to have him learn from Anton Herke, a high-profile piano player of his day.⁵ Mussorgsky captured Herke's attention quite early on with his masterful skills. Impressed with his pupil's natural talent, he invited him to perform at multiple venues with increasingly challenging music.

Of course, Mussorgsky had other plans for his life. His goal, besides composing and playing music, was to become a military officer. At thirteen, Mussorgsky joined the Cadet School of the Guards to begin his training, during which the late Emperor Nicholas honored him.⁶ He trained hard to become the best of the best, but his thoughts still wandered back to his truest passion. He couldn't ignore the musical melodies playing over and over in his mind and sparking his imagination. He decided to write down his ideas and thus created his very first composition, a small piano piece based on inspiration from Father Krupsky who introduced him to old church music.⁷ Being a quiet, introspective, and studious young man, Mussorgsky stood

³ Calvocoressi, M. D. "Mussorgsky's Youth and Early Development." Proceedings of the Musical Association 60 (1933): 89.

⁴ Lipschutz 7.

⁵ Calvocoressi, "Mussorgsky's Youth," 89.

⁶ Calvocoressi, "Mussorgsky's Youth," 89.

⁷ Calvocoressi, "Mussorgsky's Youth," 89.

out from his fellow officers, who spent more time drinking and dancing in their free hours. He himself spent more time on scholarly things, studying philosophy and history.

Once he graduated at age seventeen, Mussorgsky became an ensign in the Preobrazhensky Regiment, one of the most elite armies of the Russian Imperial Guard, where he found himself amidst a couple of common-minded individuals who he could share his musical passion with.⁸ He was quite happy to leave the Cadet School of the Guards, as he did not particularly enjoy the company of the others in his group. One of his fellow officers introduced him to a music circle under the leadership of Alexander Dargomizhsky, who dedicated his home to musicians. There, Mussorgsky met some of the most brilliant minds in the world of Russian musicianship, including but not limited to Mily Balakirev, Cesar Cui, Vladimir and Dimitri Stassov, and, later on, Rimsky-Korsakov.⁹ Now involved with both an intimate group of music makers and another small group of philosophers and writers, Mussorgsky was in his element. He formed deep bonds with each and every one of those he met. Soon, he began to study piano once more, this time under the directorship of Balakirev. He introduced Mussorgsky to complex pieces from such masters as Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Glinka, Berlioz, and Liszt.¹⁰ The Mighty Handful was established soon after. By this point in time, around 1858, Mussorgsky was no longer interested in being a soldier and instead chose to devote all his time to composing masterpieces.

Unfortunately for Mussorgsky, a great deal of hardships would befall him as he chased his dream. Most of his family's savings were lost after the serf liberation of 1861.¹¹ He required

⁸ Lipschutz 8.

⁹ Calvocoressi, "Mussorgsky's Youth," 89.

¹⁰ Lipschutz 9.

¹¹ Lipschutz 9.

help from moneylenders to push him through these troubling times and had to pause his musical endeavors to try to regain his lost wealth. Luckily, this period in the countryside gave him much-needed inspiration for his new works. He returned to his childhood experiences and remembered just how good being there had made him feel all those years ago. But his happiness would not last long, as his beloved mother died just four years later. Struggling with depression and self-doubt made him feel isolated, even from the many friends he had. After a year had passed, however, he began to recover, and he delved back into his passion in memory of his father and especially his mother. They were not only family but influential musicians that he continued to look up to.

As the years went on, Mussorgsky worked tirelessly to create unique, intriguing pieces of music ranging from piano pieces to operas. He tried to evoke realism and nationalism in his works, exploring his own personal experiences for ideas. He wrote many letters to his friends telling stories of his life. One letter details his experience in Moscow for the first time, which ultimately inspired *Boris Godunov*. He wrote, “...having seen Moscow, I am so to speak reborn; and everything Russian is very close to me now.”¹² Despite everything that happened to him—financial hardship, family losses, and health decline— he still demonstrated a profound, nationalistic love for his home country. He also wrote to his friends about his musical compositions that he was working on at the time. He especially wanted to hear feedback on his work from Rimsky-Korsakov. Mussorgsky shared his personal thoughts on both of his operas *Boris Godunov* and *The Marriage Broker*, a piece he never completed. As they exchanged responses, the two men agreed and disagreed on different elements of the songs. Rimsky-Korsakov would later take these pieces into his own hands to make revisions.

¹² Calvocoressi. “Mussorgsky’s Letters to His Friends.” *The Musical Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1923): 433.

Up until his death just a week after his 42nd birthday, Mussorgsky continued to be a hard worker and an innovator in terms of music composition. He sent in *Boris Godunov* to be reviewed several times, and each time, he was met with rejection. However, despite this, the opera was performed for the public, where it was met with wild acclaim.¹³ To this day, *Boris Godunov* is one of his most well-known operas. And yet, one of his most popular pieces as a whole still remains at the top of the list, and that piece is *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Having looked into Mussorgsky's past, one can now understand the fundamentals of what makes *Pictures at an Exhibition* so great musically. Over the years, friendly and antagonistic forces alike have ripped Mussorgsky and his work apart piece by piece trying to understand how his mind worked.¹⁴ What they found revealed much about why the ten-movement piano piece, later transcribed for orchestra, was a brilliant representation of Romantic-era ideals while still breaking musical rules. Each movement represents a picture that Viktor Hartmann painted. However, five of the movements' paintings were missing. So, in 1992, a Japanese media network released a documentary about the search for these missing works of art.¹⁵ They came up with all sorts of ideas as to what pictures inspired the five movements; however, many people believed these representations were not accurate to the movements at all. For example, the movement titled "Gnomus" was believed to be represented as Mussorgsky himself based on an incomplete painting of a man. After further investigation and more information coming to light, they realized that the idea of the gnome is actually a Russian children's toy, much like a nutcracker.¹⁶ Many

¹³ Lipschutz 14.

¹⁴ Lakond, Wladimir. Notes 5, no. 1 (1947): 107.

¹⁵ Russ, Michael. "Returning to the Exhibition: Musorgskij's Pictures Reconsidered." Music in Art 39, no. 1–2 (2014): 221.

¹⁶ Russ 221.

other misinterpretations have been made since, but when new information came to light, these radical ideas were dismissed.

Even today, Mussorgsky's *Pictures* continues to shine. Every movement is incredibly intimate and expresses a special artistic story that draws in the listener. What makes it even more special is how Mussorgsky took influence from some of the greatest Romantic composers that he had studied during his adolescence and used their ideas to inspire something brand new. As a suite, each movement has its own characteristics, but they are all part of a bigger whole.

Strangely enough, for all of his childhood musical experiences, there are no actual folk melodies present in *Pictures*.¹⁷ Instead, his suite has a more evolved collection of techniques and influences from later points in his life. Many of the Romantic composers that he studied under Balakirev gave him ideas for this masterful, artistic music collection, particularly Schumann's *Carnaval*. That said, church music does make an appearance in *Pictures*. He creates chorale-type movements that come off as majestic and ancient. While he never included words in any of his movements, he did establish lyrical melodies that carried listeners through his imagination and shared his thought process while composing. Finally, he incorporated elements of surprise in many of his movements by taking something traditional and well-known and twisting it to fit his musical personality.

Overall, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is ultimately an end-of-life reflection on everything he ever did and saw. His masterful art forms seen in his music stem from a lifetime of musical involvement and exploration. His teachers over the years have given him some of the best advice a musician could give to a student and it shows in this wonderful suite. Combining art with music, Mussorgsky's *Pictures* is a magical experience for listeners and performers, both in the original piano edition and the transcribed orchestral version. By listening to this piece, one

¹⁷ Russ 227.

can understand and appreciate Mussorgsky's intentions as a musician and his breakthroughs in the world of composition all together.

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