



Pictures at an Exhibition (USC)
Approved Program Notes – Long Version

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION IN SOUND AND ANIMATION

The use of one art form as a means of expression to enhance or comment upon another is a well-known phenomenon, particularly within the realms of art and music. Composers throughout history have responded to inspiration from the visual arts, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* being but one of the most famous examples. Ion Concert Media has taken matters a step further. Using Mussorgsky's musical response to Hartmann's visual images – paintings, drawings, and designs – a team of eleven students and graduates at the USC School of Cinematic Arts in Los Angeles, under the direction of Michael Patterson and Candace Reckinger, created animated interpretations of the music, thus absorbing three different art forms into a single creative entity of rich fantasy, whimsy, and adventure. Each art form derives impetus and inspiration from the others, generating a fruitful symbiotic relationship between them. The animators' work was first seen in January of 2011 as part of the opening ceremonies of the New World Center in Miami Beach, Florida, with Michael Tilson Thomas conducting the New World Symphony.

When Viktor Hartmann, an artist, designer and sculptor, died of a heart attack in 1873, his close friend Modest Mussorgsky was devastated. Mussorgsky was further plagued with guilt feelings, recalling that, had he run for a doctor rather than trying to comfort the stricken Hartmann, the artist might have lived. Mussorgsky slipped into depression, aggravated by his alcohol problem. Vladimir Stasov, a music critic and friend of both Mussorgsky and Hartmann, arranged an exhibit of about four hundred works of the deceased artist, hoping that this tribute might in some way relieve Mussorgsky's depression. The exhibition opened in January, 1874 at the St. Petersburg Society of Architects.

Thanks to Stasov, Mussorgsky was inspired to create a suite of ten musical portraits for piano, his only significant work for this instrument. According to the art and music critic Alfred Frankenstein, only three of the movements correspond to works actually in Stasov's exhibit; the others were items Mussorgsky had seen at Hartmann's home. The entire set was written in a single burst of creative energy during June of 1874. The music was not published until 1886, and did not achieve popularity in any form until Maurice Ravel orchestrated it in 1922. The first performance in this form was given on October 19 of that year, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky at the Paris

Opéra. Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony introduced *Pictures* to North America in November of the following year.

Mussorgsky's musical portraits are based on Hartmann's paintings and illustrations, which Hartmann had created while studying art in Italy and Paris. Some depict scenes of Russian life while others have obvious links to Europe. The USC animators have remained remarkably faithful to the spirit of both Hartmann's paintings and Mussorgsky's music while letting their minds roam freely to create unique and imaginative responses. Michael Patterson's and Candace Reckinger's notes about the animated elements have been incorporated into the following descriptions.

PROMENADE 1 – The opening theme accompanies an imaginary stroll through the picture gallery. We are often told that this theme represents the composer walking about, leisurely going from painting to painting, allowing first this one, then that one, to catch his eye. This much is true. Mussorgsky even stated: "My own physiognomy peeps out through the intermezzos," as a way of explaining the changes of mood, rhythm, and orchestral coloring through which the Promenade theme passes. But after its initial statement this theme appears only three more times as an interlude between pictures, implying that the viewer may be taking in several pictures from one position. (The theme is also heard in the section "With the Dead in a Dead Language" and embedded in the final "Great Gate at Kiev.") In the animated sequence created by Emily Eckstein, we find ourselves in a spacious modern gallery with a stylish crowd milling about. Some of those in attendance stop before the first picture.

THE GNOME – Hartmann designed a nutcracker, a child's toy made of wood for the Christmas tree at the Artists Club. It was styled after a small, grotesque gnome with gnarled legs and erratic hopping movements; nuts were meant to be cracked in its jaws. Andy Lyon's animation envisions the character instead as a grotesque circus performer, a misanthropic and malevolent creature that seeks attention and applause through his efforts to both entertain and intimidate us. The animated character is drawn in an abstract style that might well have leaped out of a Picasso painting.

PROMENADE 2 – For the second promenade, Emily Eckstein blends motion graphics with live-action photography to create a stylized mix of figurative imagery and design. The geometric shapes are inspired by Frank Gehry's designs for the aforementioned concert hall in Miami Beach. Groups of people stroll off into adjacent galleries, and the mood turns somber as several museum-goers stop to look at the next painting.

THE OLD CASTLE – Inspired by his travels in Italy, Hartmann created a watercolor of a troubadour singing in the moonlight in front of a medieval castle. His melancholic song is "sung" by the alto saxophone. The length of this section suggests this may have been one of Mussorgsky's favorite paintings. In the animation by Ryan Kravetz and Elizabeth Willy, doors open and beckon us enter. We travel through ghostly rooms, then out into a phosphorescent garden where we find the troubadour. Miami's historic landmark, the Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, served as a further source of inspiration. The animation combines 3-D and 2-D techniques with live-action photography.

PROMENADE 3 – We are roused from the enchantment of the Old Castle to discover that we have traveled back in time to a majestic nineteenth-century art gallery with sunlight streaming in from overhead windows. A crowd is strolling through grand halls. This and the remaining promenade, animated by Michael Patterson, are set in the same time period, and combine hand-drawn animation with live actors and photographs.

TUILERIES – Hartmann and Mussorgsky take us to Paris for a lively picture of children scampering about in the famous garden, engaged in horseplay while their nannies chatter. Cecilia Fletcher’s animation perfectly captures the scene in her patterned tapestry, which culminates in a kinetic zoetropic effect. Her design is reminiscent of early-to-mid-twentieth-century book illustrations.

BYDLO – The word means “cattle” in Polish. As Mussorgsky/Ravel portrayed the scene, an oxcart on giant, lumbering wheels lumbers into view, its driver singing a folk song in the Aeolian mode (“sung” by a tuba). As the cart approaches, the music rises to a terrific climax, and as it passes on, the music gradually diminishes in volume. Melissa Bouwman, using a cut-out style, adds an important role for peasants working in the fields beneath a majestic sky. And what do you suppose her oxcart is carrying? A giant tuba!

PROMENADE 4 – The atmosphere turns melancholic as patrons wander off to contemplate various pictures. A young girl leads her uncle by the hand to the next picture, a most curious one indeed, not least of all as it comes to life before her very eyes.

BALLET OF THE UNHATCHED CHICKS – Hartmann’s scene portrays his costume designs for a ballet in which cheeping baby canaries dance about, still enclosed in their shells with wings and legs protruding. This ballet was actually produced in St. Petersburg in 1871 with choreography by Petipa and music by Julius Gerber. Shaun Seong-Young Kim sets his comic scene in an egg hatchery where baby chicks form a corps de ballet, diligently practicing their dance steps. When a baby rooster joins the party, matters take an amorous turn. The 3-D set designs incorporate passing references to painted Russian eggs, Degas dancers, and Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* ballet.

SAMUEL GOLDENBERG AND SCHMUYLE – Mussorgsky called this number “Two Polish Jews, Rich and Poor.” The Jews’ fictitious names were creations of Hartmann, who made individual pencil drawings of these two characters conjured up from the Warsaw ghetto he had visited. The personalities are vividly drawn: the rich man is pompous, self-important, arrogant; the poor man is sniveling, beseeching, nervous, pitiable. Mussorgsky owned these drawings, and contributed them to the exhibition. Carolyn Chrisman, using classic hand-drawn character-animation techniques, sees things somewhat differently, though in the same spirit of dichotomy. At a calligrapher’s desk sits an unfinished *ketubah* (Jewish marriage contract), written in Aramaic. The two characters emerge from the parchment. In the course of cleaning up after his boss Goldenberg, Schmuyle cannot resist demonstrating his own artistic impulses.

THE MARKETPLACE AT LIMOGES – This is another bustling scene, as we can easily

determine from Mussorgsky's music. Here Hartmann portrays not children but rather housewives chattering, babbling, and arguing away. Steven Day offers a more generalized and frantic vision of marketplace activity. Using scenes shot in Europe and Japan, his animated collage combines stop-motion with time-lapse and long-exposure photography. At the height of the feverish commotion the music suddenly plunges into the next scene.

CATACOMBS – Hartmann himself, lantern in hand, explores the subterranean passages of Paris. Animator Candace Reckinger admirably captures the grim, oppressive character and dark colors of Mussorgsky's music in her sequence, created from both still and moving imagery.

WITH THE DEAD IN A DEAD LANGUAGE – Mussorgsky's title is in Latin (*Cum mortuis in lingua mortua*). We are still in the catacombs. Eerie, ominous sounds from the orchestra accompany the grisly sight of skulls glowing faintly from within as the visitors stroll around to the promenade theme. Reckinger's and Patterson's depiction of this ghostly scene leaves nothing to the imagination.

BABA YAGA'S HUT ON CHICKEN LEGS – Baba Yaga is the fabled witch of Russian folklore. Hartmann drew her abode as a fantastic bronze clock-face mounted on chicken legs. Mussorgsky's music seems more to portray the fearsome witch's ride through the air in her mortar, steering with a pestle. Alessandro Ceglia, using a bold, illustrative style and hand-drawn animation, takes us back to Hartmann's vision but expands it into a supernatural nightmare deep in the forest.

THE GREAT GATE AT KIEV – Hartmann designed a gate (never built) to commemorate Alexander II's narrow escape from an assassination attempt in Kiev. The design shows an ancient Russian gate with a cupola shaped like a Slavonic helmet. It all looks rather modest compared to what Mussorgsky created. In its original piano manifestation it is grand enough, but Ravel made it into something truly magnificent in his version for full orchestra. Ria Ama takes matters even further. Using Hartmann's design as a point of departure, she adds a sunrise, a candlelit view of the imagined interior, icons, kaleidoscopic projections, floodlights, giant bells (vividly depicted in the orchestra), and, as the music rises to massive proportions, a spectacular fireworks display.

ROBERT MARKOW



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