

West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021
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Bantry and Beyond

Russian Pictures

4. Russian Masters

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Anna Fedorova

Scriabin

Piano Sonata No.2 in G sharp minor Op.19

Rachmaninov

Piano Prelude in G major Op.32/5

Piano Prelude in G sharp minor Op.32/12

Piano Prelude in B flat Op.23/2

Scriabin

Piano Sonata No.9 'Messe Noire' Op.68

Mussorgsky

Pictures at an Exhibition

Alexander Scriabin [1872 – 1915]**Piano Sonata No 2 Opus 19** [1895]

1. *Andante*
2. *Presto*

The Scriabins were traditionally a military family however Scriabin's father became a minor diplomat and was frequently away from home. His mother was a very promising concert pianist who had been praised by both the Rubinstein brothers and by Tchaikovsky. She died of tuberculosis before Scriabin was two. As a result, Scriabin was raised by his grandmothers and an aunt. Apparently they indulged the young composer to such an extent that this, in addition to the lack of a father figure in the household, is often cited as the reasons why Scriabin grew up to be the wildly eccentric, effeminate and egocentric composer he became.

After Scriabin decided to reject a military career, he took up the piano with great success. He graduated from the Moscow conservatoire in second place after Rachmaninov. Scriabin lacked Rachmaninov's famous reach at the keyboard being able to span a little more than an octave with one hand. Nevertheless, Scriabin must have had a formidable technique. He played nearly all his own works in public. These still provide modern pianists with technical difficulties few other composers can match.

Rachmaninov and Scriabin remained friends for the rest of Scriabin's life. In his concerts Rachmaninov regularly included pieces by Scriabin. There are no records of Scriabin including pieces by Rachmaninov in his (Scriabin's) concerts. The friendship between the two composers is the more remarkable in that Moscow musical life before the First World War was torn between the Rachmaninovists (the traditionalists) and the Scriabinists (the progressives).

After leaving the Conservatoire, Scriabin remained living with his aunt and grandmother for the next five years. A music publisher, Belyayev, provided generous support and took Scriabin on his first European tour in 1895. Shortly after his return, Scriabin married Vera Ivanovna, a young pianist, and they took their honeymoon in the Crimea. It was here that Scriabin completed his second piano sonata. It became one of his favourites and he frequently performed it throughout his career.

Scriabin's first sonata is often described as being (too) heavily influenced by Chopin. In his second in G sharp minor Scriabin finds his voice. As the dark opening chords which announce the opening theme unfold, we are immediately taken to a sumptuous harmonic world. A gentle second subject follows. The passionate development is largely based on the opening theme and the movement ends with a delicate coda. The finale is one of high-speed perpetual motion enhanced by a lyrical and richly harmonic accompaniment. Or as Scriabin put it himself;

The first section (movement) represents the quiet of a southern night on the seashore; the development is the dark agitation of the deep, deep sea. The E major middle

section shows caressing moonlight coming after the first darkness of night. The second movement represents the vast expanse of ocean in stormy agitation.

David Winter

Sergei Rachmaninov [1873-1943]

Prelude No. 16 Op. 32/5 Moderato [1910]

Prelude No. 23 Op. 32/12 Allegro [1910]

Prelude No. 3 Op. 23/2 Maestoso [1903]

Just as Bach, Chopin, and later Debussy all wrote 24 preludes; one for each of the twelve major and minor keys, so did Rachmaninov. However, instead of writing them in sets of twelve, Rachmaninov took a more roundabout route. His first prelude in C sharp minor (opus 3) was completed in 1892 following his success in graduating from the Moscow Conservatoire with the "Great Gold Prize". The prelude was one of his first works to gain international recognition. It became a standard (and for Rachmaninov a seriously tiresome) encore piece during the composer's long years of exile in the West which were largely devoted to piano recitals.

The second set (opus 23) consists of ten further preludes and was completed in 1903 after the success of his second piano concerto. The final group (opus 32) followed the third piano concerto in 1910. By this time, Rachmaninov clearly intended to complete 24 preludes, so his final set consists of thirteen works.

All Rachmaninov's preludes are composed following a great personal success and this is reflected in the extraordinary exuberance of these pieces. Largely structured on a rough ABA pattern, Rachmaninov often develops his preludes from quite simple themes or ideas that occur in the first few bars. These are then developed and expanded to produce works some of which are substantially longer than Chopin's preludes and have been described as "miniature tone poems".

Clearly composed for a great virtuoso (Rachmaninov himself of course), the opus 23 set contain some of the grandest piano music ever written. This is a post Lisztian world when the full resources (and nearly all the notes) of a concert grand are shown off to magnificent effect. The later opus 32 preludes are more reflective and more emotional. They use a kind of musical impressionism not too distant from the piano works of Rachmaninov's French contemporaries.

Prelude no 16 opus 32 no 5 is in G major. It is built up from the broken chords which appear in the first two bars. These provide the bass which accompanies a delightful tune in the high treble. This has been described as "consoling lyricism" After a series of trills the music returns to the opening material and this exquisite prelude ends in delicate and delightful nostalgia.

Prelude no 23 opus 32 no 12 shows that even in a minor key (here G sharp minor) these preludes retain their exuberance. It opens with a shimmering motif, which dominates the whole prelude. A wistful tune appears in the bass and these ideas are developed with gloriously rich harmonies. After a passing reference to Chopin, the music reaches a vigorous climax and the opening ideas return for a sumptuous coda.

The B flat prelude (opus 23 no 2) is a triumphant example of the grandest of preludes opening with cascades of arpeggios and indomitable chords. A contrapuntal middle section is calmer, lyrical and more melancholy. The final section returns to the heroic splendour of the opening material and the prelude concludes with a magnificent flourish.

David Winter

Alexander Scriabin [1872-1915]

Piano Sonata No 9 Op.68 (Messe Noire - Black Mass) [1913]

1. *Legendaire*

Moderato quasi andante – Molto meno vivo – Allegro molto – Alla marcia – Allegro – Presto – Tempo primo

Much had happened to Scriabin in the sixteen years between the Second and Ninth Sonatas. In 1904 he abandoned his wife and went to live with Tatyana Schlozer. She was nineteen years old and was completely devoted to him. She helped him with the chores of composing such as preparing his scores and orchestral parts. Although the Scriabins were legally separated, the Orthodox Church made divorce extremely difficult and expensive. Thus Scriabin and Schlozer lived together quite openly. This shocked conservative circles in Moscow and began to give rise to the rumours that Scriabin led a debauched and dissolute life.

These were not helped by Scriabin's increasing fascination with the ideas of Nietzsche, socialism and above all theosophy. He came to believe that he could unite all the arts in a wonderful ecstatic moment which would transport society on to a higher plane. Whether Scriabin realised that these ideas were damaging the reception of his music or not, he began to back off from these grandiose plans in the years before he died.

This cocktail of metaphysical beliefs would be considered balmy by many people today, but they were not far removed from ideas which were widely circulating at the time. Even Rimsky-Korsakov, a conservative figure who was not a supporter of Scriabin, agreed that there was a relationship between different colours and different keys. The trouble was they disagreed on which colours should be associated with which keys. Nevertheless, Scriabin and his music, for a short time, became a cult. Today, it can be said of his metaphysical ideas, that they were at least inclusive and optimistic and were comparatively harmless in comparison to the racist ideology of at least one other cult composer of the nineteenth century.

Although Scriabin's music developed in harmonic complexity, it never became atonal. His harmonies, often based on extended dominant chords, fourths and augmented sixths, were in many cases familiar to even Beethoven and Schubert. However, Scriabin used them to delay harmonic resolutions for extended periods and provide a richness of texture which no contemporary could match.

From the sixth sonata onwards, Scriabin abandoned key signatures, but he never made the clean break with the past that the music of Stravinsky and Debussy was supposed to have achieved. Stravinsky, who said of the last three sonatas that they were incomparable, was clearly influenced by Scriabin, as was nearly every other twentieth century Russian composer. If you compare the music of Scriabin with that of Debussy or Stravinsky around 1912, there are as many similarities as differences.

The last three sonatas, all of which have just one movement, are usually regarded as showing Scriabin at the height of his powers. Completed in 1913, the Ninth Sonata is sometimes given the sub-title "black mass". This phrase was not Scriabin's own but it is said he approved of it. The sonata is certainly a dark work which in eight short minutes takes the listener on an extraordinary journey. The sonata begins quietly and slowly with an awkward descending chromatic idea. This is the main theme of the movement. To this is added a figure of repeated notes. These two ideas are extensively and richly developed in the rest of the work. Slowly the music begins to get faster and louder. It reaches an immense climax with thunderous bass chords. The brief coda returns to the opening theme. The sonata ends with a quiet but sinister note in the bass.

David Winter

Modest Mussorgsky [1839-1881]

***Pictures at an Exhibition* [1874]**

Promenade

1. *Gnomus*

Promenade

2. *Il vecchio castello (The Old Castle)*

Promenade

3. *Tuileries (Children quarrelling after play)*

4. *Bydlo (A Polish Ox-cart)*

Promenade

5. *Ballet of the unhatched chicks*

6. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle (Two Polish Jews, one rich, the other poor)*

Promenade

7. *Limoges, the market place*

8. *Catacombae - Sepulchrum Romanum*

Con mortuis in lingua mortua

9. *Baba Yaga (The hut on Fowl's Legs)*

10. *The Great Gate of Kiev*

To you, Generalissimo, sponsor of the Hartman Exhibition, in remembrance of our dear Victor, 27 June '74.

Thus did Mussorgsky dedicate his *Pictures at an Exhibition* to Vladimir Stasov, the critic, scholar and self-appointed champion of the national school in all the Russian arts. Stasov was a towering figure in mid-nineteenth-century Russian culture: he discovered many of its greatest talents – Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Repin, Kramskoi; he inspired many of their works and he fought their battles in countless thunderous articles. Turgenev caricatured him as *always foaming and frothing over like a bottle of sour kvas*.

It is hard for us to imagine the intensity of the battle that was fought between the two schools of thought at that crucial time in the development of Russian music. On the one hand stood the St Petersburg Conservatory led by Anton Rubinstein, who wholeheartedly espoused the great German tradition of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Rubinstein was contemptuous of the amateurism of musical life in Russia and was determined to create new standards of performance and composition. On the other hand stood those Russian composers, who were making a concerted effort to escape the stranglehold of European laws of composition and to create a national tradition of Russian music. More than any of his colleagues, Mussorgsky rejected the European school out of hand and looked to the traditions of the Russian folk as a means of overturning it.

Victor Hartman had a huge influence on Mussorgsky's passionate involvement in the neo-Russian movement. He was both an architect and a painter and his drawings were based on years of study of medieval Russian ornament. His most famous drawing was his fanciful design for the Kiev city gate, shaped in the form of a warrior's helmet with a *kokoshnik* arch alongside it, complete with great bells. When Hartman died suddenly in July 1873, Mussorgsky was devastated and he joined with Stasov in organising a celebration of his friend's life-work. The posthumous Exhibition consisted of about four hundred watercolours, drawings, sketches, architectural drawings and theatrical and costume designs, all gathered together in St Petersburg a year after his death. It was this Exhibition that inspired Mussorgsky's magnificent tribute to his friend – originally described as *Album Series on the genius architect Hartman*. And it was this work, composed in a mere three weeks, more than any other that came to define the new Russian style of composition.

Appearances can be deceptive, Mussorgsky was lazy, slovenly, heavy-drinking – so much so he died of alcoholism at the age of 42 – full of swagger and explosive energy and yet he was a clear and clever thinker and by far the greatest Russian composer of his generation. *Pictures* is also deceptive, seemingly a haphazard selection of musical portraits connected only by the famous *Promenade*, where the far from lightweight composer is depicted ambling around the Exhibition. Clearly the formal Western rules of exposition and development have been thrown to the winds. However the apparent idiosyncrasy of the work conceals a formal unity achieved through almost all of the musical material being derived from the opening *Promenade*. This powerful theme *nel modo russo, senza allegrezza, ma poco sostenuto* is a folk-inspired tune that reaches deep into the Russian imagination. This simple melody throws into relief the visionary, expressionist style of

Mussorgsky's interpretation of Hartman's pictures. His choice of pictures is calculated both to honour the substantial range of Hartman's achievement and to show, despite his intrinsic Russianness, how international his perspective was – picture titles are in French, Latin, Italian, Polish, Yiddish and Russian.

The first picture, *Gnomus*, is deliberately grotesque, a nutcracker in the shape of a gnome with bow legs designed as an ornament for the Christmas Tree of the Artist's Club. A second promenade leads to *Il vecchio Castello*. Hartman's original is lost but the exhibition catalogue mentions drawings of a French castle with a singing troubadour, so the Italian title is perhaps inspired by the siciliano rhythm. The chiming of a single unchanging bass note throughout the piece evokes an atmosphere of timelessness. A further promenade is broken off in an air of expectancy leading us to a vivid picture of the children quarrelling in the *Tuileries* gardens. We turn immediately to *Bydlo*, a massive depiction of a Polish cart drawn by two oxen presented fortissimo before fading into the distance at the end. Another promenade leads us to the *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*, costume designs for children who appeared as canary chicks in Julius Gerber's ballet *Trilbi*; their canary heads, wings and feet protrude from the large eggs that enclose their bodies. Mussorgsky's vision is in the form of a scherzo and trio, with the trio's trills suggesting the fluttering of tiny wings.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle is a conflation of two drawings by Hartman of two Polish Jews, one rich and one poor. Mussorgsky has them conversing with each other. Another extended promenade – the last one in its original form – leads to the market at *Limoges*, where the gossiping women compete frantically with each other to be the first with the news about the recovery of a fugitive cow. The argument reaches dizzying proportions before being dramatically silenced by a thunderous chord announcing the descent into *Catacombae*, the catacombs of Paris where Hartman depicts himself face-to-face with a heap of illuminated skulls. This nightmare brings forth a series of terrible discords that leads directly to a ghostly promenade. Here the right-hand tremolos suggest the flickering lantern – *With the dead in a dead language* – and by way of explanation in a marginal comment, *the creative spirit of the deceased Hartman leads me to the skulls, invokes them, and they silently light up*.

And so we move to the extraordinary climax where the pictures seem to have been left behind. The penultimate piece portrays the terrifying ogress of Russian folk-lore, *Baba-Yaga*. Hartman's design for a surreal clock mounted on chickens legs was based on the exotic tale of the witch who lived in a hut on chicken's legs deep in the forest. She ate children and ground up their bones with the mortar and pestle that she also used as a bizarre means of transport. *The Great Gate of Kiev* is one of the most dramatic finales ever, even more impressive in its original version than in Ravel's orchestration. Can, we ask, can a piano really make such an overwhelming sound? The bells ring out in triumph from the Great Gate and combine with the ancient Russian hymn, the chant of Znamenny, while the harmony and the melodic shape seem distantly to recall the promenade theme. This is glorious, uplifting, beautiful and even tender music, a picture of all Russia drawn in sound and a moving tribute to friendship.

Francis Humphrys