

## **Pictures At An Exhibition**

### A Dialogue of Artists

*Pictures At An Exhibition*, a piano piece written by Modest Mussorgsky, is said to memorialize Mussorgsky's close friend. However, the work captures much more than just a past friend and continues to commemorate artistic fellowship through an evolving and transforming art form. What makes *Pictures At An Exhibition* such an extraordinary work is it is not just one person's artistic creation, but also a product of a community of creative ideas. In its most reduced form, Mussorgsky's piece is a comment on ten pictures by artist Victor Hartmann. In more detailed analysis, Mussorgsky's piece is a dialogue of memories between the two artists, a mutual friendship of an art critic, and a collection of tales about France and a revival of Russian folk art. Without surprise, Mussorgsky's work did not end with himself and the momentum on the piece that he helped build was carried on by the artistic community of his time, leaving the work available to open conversation that even artists of today can contribute to.

The idea begins with a Volga German artist living in Russia named Victor Hartmann. Hartmann [1], who was orphaned at a young age, was raised by his uncle whose profession as an architect and love for art encouraged Hartman to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. Hartmann pioneered a Russian revival in which traditional Russian styles and concepts were joined with the impressionistic trend of the time. Hartmann gathered his inspiration from his travels in Russia and Western Europe, incorporating folk lore, sights, and experiences that he encountered into his watercolors,

sketches, and architecture. Hartmann and Mussorgsky were said to have been introduced to each other by the prominent Russian art critic, Vladimir Stasov, and the three are said to have had a stable friendship. At the age of thirty-nine, Hartmann died without warning from an aneurysm [1].

Upon Hartmann's death, Vladimir Stasov became the next contributor. Stasov is often referred to as Russia's greatest art critic and is known for being immensely influential in all aspects of the Russian art culture. Stasov was a great supporter of embracing Russia's folklore for inspiration in the modern art scene, and Hartmann was one of Stasov's greatest successes in this aspect. Needless to say, Stasov was shocked by Hartmann's sudden death. Stasov's artistic power lay in his ability to produce and critique artists and shortly after his friend's passing he used his powers to organize a tributary exhibition of the four hundred of Hartmann's greatest works [2].

The exhibitions took place in early 1874, and Mussorgsky, without question, attended the event. Mussorgsky was emotionally fractured by his friend's death stating in writing "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat live on and creatures like Hartmann must die?" [3]. Mussorgsky probably wandered the galleries multiple times, the life work of a friend who lived with depth and enthusiasms, reduced to mere paintings and drawings. In a moment of inspiration, Mussorgsky decided to memorialize his friend and the exhibition in music. The piece, which he called *Pictures at an Exhibition*, consists of ten pictures, or short works inspired by one of the pictures that Mussorgsky viewed, and five intermediary promenades that are spread through the work. It is interesting that

Mussorgsky did not generalize the experience and use the entire exhibition as concept material, but instead chose very specific and single works. The piano work flows as if a viewer, embodied in the promenades, is wandering through the exhibition, closely examining the pictures that catch the viewer's eye [4]. Stasov's arrangement and placement of works in the exhibition hall probably had an impact on the ones that Mussorgsky selected. For example, the first picture in the piece is titled *Gnomus* and is based on a drawing of a folk art nutcracker, the folk art likely being something that Stasov admired and would have emphasized in the exhibition. However, it is equally likely that each of the works is a comment or reflection on Mussorgsky's relationship with Hartmann. *Catacombs* is inspired by the picture of Hartman examining the catacombs in France [5], and it is likely that Mussorgsky may have been drawn to this picture due to a story or tale Hartmann told him. Regardless of the individual inspirations, Mussorgsky was compelled by his idea and in less than a month finished this composition. The piece was performed for Mussorgsky, however it lived a secluded infancy and was relatively unheard of until 12 years later [6].

Mussorgsky died seven years after composing *Pictures At An Exhibition*. Much of his works lay dormant until composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov began sorting through Mussorgsky pieces and selecting ones of worth to be published. In 1886 Rimsky-Korsakov published and edited score of *Pictures At An Exhibition* [6].

The published score became a piano favorite, and multiple arrangers created versions of the work. Russian conductor Serge Koussevitzky became inspired by the

piece and set out to create an arrangement for orchestra that did the piece justice. Koussevitzky, who had little arranging talent, commissioned world famous composer Maurice Ravel in 1922 to make an arrangement fit for an orchestra [7]. Koussevitzky published the arrangement in 1929 and made the first recording with the Boston Symphony [8]. Ravel's arrangement is the most popular of arrangements, however, there are numerous versions available for varying instrumentations.

In modern times the creative momentum that Mussorgsky created with his piece has slowed down. The production of Mussorgsky's original manuscript in 1975 has aided in a modern trend of playing *Pictures At An Exhibition* in its "original form." Even with the trend towards preservation of the past, some artists have embodied Mussorgsky's transformation of the medium. The rock group Emerson Lake and Palmer commissioned painter William Neal to paint pictures from *Pictures At An Exhibition* for the next EL&P album [9]. Neal took the thematic material of *Pictures At An Exhibition* and combined it with EL&P symbolism. The album itself featured a rock version of some parts of Mussorgsky's work. Author Sara Houghteling used Mussorgsky's piece as inspiration for her book about missing art in post world war II France titled Pictures at an Exhibition [11].

#### Analysis of *Pictures At An Exhibition*

The work begins with a "Promenade", in which the "viewer" is embodied by the lyrical melody. The first three movements, "Gnomus", "Vecchio Castello", and "Tuileries", are light or broken and thin, as if the viewer is only half interested in them.

The concentration of the pieces increases in the fourth movement “Bydlo” where larger chords paired with more interesting melodies give the impression of the oxen pulling the overburdened cart. The fourth promenade then begins slower than the previous ones, as if the viewer is still contemplating the past picture as he moves on to the next. The fifth promenade begins after “Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks” and “Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle”. The fifth promenade is unique in that the tempo, which has been slowing down each successive promenade, is restored to the original allegro, as if the viewer is so taken by the art that he/she now must view everything. “The Market at Limoges” is next in which frantic atmosphere of the market square is then contrasted with somber and dreary nature of “The Catacombs”. The picture from which the song was inspired was focused around Victor Hartman and a friend as they journeyed the French catacombs. This movement is placed about where the climax of the work would be expected, and is also the only two movement picture. The special attention is most likely because of the picture’s inclusion of Hartmann. A classic Russian folk tale is depicted in “The Hut on Fowl's Legs”, which in Stasov’s mind would have been one of the best portraits of Hartmann’s work. The final piece is “The Bogatyr Gates” or the heroes’ gate that gives a grand conclusion to *Pictures At An Exhibition*.

#### Mussorgsky At A Glance:

Modest Mussorgsky, who was born in rural area of Karevo, Russia, came from a wealthy family. Mussorgsky studied piano music at many places in Russia, but eventually was enrolled into a cadet training school and then commissioned as an officer [6]. After serving as an officer, Mussorgsky resigned his position and returned to

studying music, this time with a focus on composition [11]. Mussorgsky focused mainly on composing opera and employed new compositional techniques that focused on unique things, such as the voice inflections of the melodic line. His nationalistic tendencies and association with Vladimir Stasov included him in the “great five”, a group of prominent Russian composers of the time [11].

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