

Maurice Ravel's Pictures
Enhancing Mussorgsky's Most Treasured Compositional Philosophy

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In his treatise concerning the purpose and nature of art, the Great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, wrote that beauty in itself is not the primary objective of the serious artist. This philosophy, along with many others, was shared by Tolstoy and the youngest member of the *moguchaya kuchka*¹, Modeste Mussorgsky². Writing to Stassov in 1872, Moussorgksy noted that ‘the artistic representation of mere beauty, in the material sense of the word, is sheer childness, a rudimentary form of art.’³ Ideal music was, for this Russian master, not one driven by the pursuit of beauty alone, but one characterized by realism⁴, making it comprehensible to the masses. An exemplary manifestation of this compositional principle can be observed in Mussorgsky’s best known, and most important work for piano solo, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The popularity that this piece has achieved, however, is slightly ironic. Following its publication in 1886, the composition generated little interest among pianists, and only became widely known after composers, other than Mussorgsky himself, orchestrated it. It was Maurice Ravel, in response to a commission by Serge Koussevitzky⁵, who penned the most famous of the numerous orchestral versions in 1922. Although Ravel’s orchestration of the work continues to be celebrated today, it is impossible to tell if Mussorgsky would have welcomed it. One can conjecture, however, based on the question of whether or not the Frenchman’s interpretation maintains the same transparent realism that was so important to Mussorgsky’s compositional thought. An analysis of both scores reveals that overall, Ravel’s orchestration enhances this sought after sense of realism.⁶

¹ Russian for ‘Mighty Handful’, this term was given to a quintet of amateur (at the time) composers by the critic Vladimir Stassov in 1867. This group included Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and César Cui (now largely forgotten about).

² See Gerald Abraham. ‘Tolstoy and Moussorgsky: A Parallelism of Minds.’ *Music & Letters*, Vol. 12, No.1 (Jan., 1931), 54-59.

³ Ibis.

⁴ It should be noted that realism, in the truest sense of the term, is impossible to achieve in music. The representation of actions, objects, and social conditions as they actually are requires a visual (painting) or descriptive (literature) medium. As an auditory art form, music is only capable of representing these things in an abstract form; the listener is required to associate musical ideas with non-musical ones.

⁵ Part of the agreement between Ravel and Koussevitzky was that the latter would be granted exclusive performance rights for five years. Having just become music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Koussevitzky led the work to great acclaim of critics and audiences alike.

⁶ The author recognizes the subjectivity of this assertion; however, it should be mentioned that the field of music analysis in itself is subjective, and especially so in the case of Mussorgsky. This results from the composer’s belief that a comprehension of music should remain within the grasp of even the lowest *moujik*. Nonetheless, in an attempt to avoid deviating too much from what Mussorgsky intended to depict, Stassov’s descriptions of the pictures are strictly adhered to. Details on how the depictions unfold musically have been restricted to Stassov’s biography of the composer.

On the surface, *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a musical representation of ten works by Victor Hartmann⁷ that an observer (presumably Mussorgsky himself) comes across when walking about an art gallery. At a deeper level, the piece pays homage to Mussorgsky's good friend Hartmann, whose death the composer lamented severely. Even more than this, it has been suggested that *Pictures* was an attempt to immortalize the under-appreciated architect, whose "efforts [ironically] were often directed towards ephemeral things – buildings for fairs, commemorative monuments, and so on."⁸ Having had such a deep comradeship with Hartmann, it is no wonder that Mussorgsky chose to begin the work with a self-image.

In the five appearances of the opening *Promenade*, "the composer has shown himself pacing here and there; sometimes loitering, sometimes hastening to get near a picture; sometimes the joyful gait slackens – Mussorgsky thinking of his dead friend."⁹ In the orchestral scoring of each *Promenade*, Ravel outlines the different variations on the opening cell by using a variety of different orchestrations. What is more significant, however, is the fact that he omits the final *Promenade* of Mussorgsky's original. Although one would like to propose a complex reasoning behind this fact, the response may be quite simple. The final *Promenade* is the only one of the five that does not differ in character from the first. Ravel may very well have seen this as an unnecessary repeat.¹⁰

The first piece of the set, entitled *Gnomus* (Gnome), depicts "a little gnome clumsily running with crooked legs."¹¹ In the original piano score, Mussorgsky represents the awkwardness of the gnome's movement using sudden, stark dynamic contrasts, hemiolas, and juxtapositions of extreme registers. In place of motivic development, Mussorgsky resorts to something reminiscent of block technique¹² (best-known from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*), which also serves to enhance the image of the subject's

⁷ Hartmann was primarily an architect; however, the works depicted by the music include six travel sketches, two craft designs, one stage design, and only one architectural plan.

⁸ See Alfred Frankenstein. 'Victor Hartmann and Modeste Mussorgsky.' *Music Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Jul., 1939), 268-291.

⁹ Stasov quoted in M.D. Calvocoressi. *Mussorgsky*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1919.

¹⁰ A discussion concerning the different incarnations of the promenade could easily occupy an entire paper. Consequently, this topic will be treated in a separate essay.

¹¹ All descriptions of the paintings used that are quoted, are taken from Stasov's biography of Mussorgsky, as reproduced in M.D. Calvocoressi. *Mussorgsky*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1919.

¹² A compositional device, which intersperses or juxtaposes previously stated material with new or reused material. For example, see mm. 47-55 of the piano score.

sporadic motion. Evidently, all of these elements are retained in Ravel's orchestration, as they are inherent in the musical fabric itself; however, he exploits the superior diversity of the orchestra to further intensify the sense of fragmentation and unevenness achieved by Mussorgsky. For instance, in measure two, Ravel superimposes three different articulations on the downbeat. The G^b octave is played as a pizzicato quarter-note in the woodwinds, as an eighth-note in the strings, and is held into the next bar by the horns. This tripartite division is not possible on the piano, as the instrument does not allow for an individual pitch-class to be struck simultaneously in the same octave. A more apparent example of how Ravel intensifies the realism of the Gnome's musical image occurs at mm.19-38 of the orchestral score. In the original score, Mussorgsky simply repeats the ten-measure section beginning at m.19. Ravel, on the other hand, orchestrates the repeat in a vastly different way by omitting the three flutes and oboes that presented the melody in the first appearance of the theme, and adding a harp and celesta, the latter of which presents the theme. Further more, the repeat sees the inclusion of glissandi in the strings marked *arco sulla tastiera*.¹³ These changes highlight the Gnome's spasmodic movements, in that no idea is repeated without some type of transformation.

Tuileries, the third picture represented in Mussorgsky's work, is described as "an avenue in the garden of the Tuileries, with a swarm of children and nurses."¹⁴ The most obvious thing to note in Ravel's orchestration of this movement is that the brass section is omitted. The heavy sound that characterizes this excluded section would not have suited the subjects envisioned by Mussorgsky; children and Nurses (the feminine element) are traditionally characterized by gentleness, and nurturing. At the beginning Ravel scores the music for woodwinds alone, with the flutes and oboes playing the running sixteenth-notes. It is only at m.14 that the other orchestral force, the strings, come in alone. In the original, Mussorgsky attempts to differentiate these two sections (one representing the children and the other the Nurses) with a change in register, and rhythmic augmentation. Although this proves effective, Ravel's use of two different orchestral sections expands this two dimensional differentiation (register, diminution) to one of three dimensions (contrast in colour). Moreover, the distinction between the two sets of characters in the orchestral version is clarified significantly in comparison to the original at m.15. Here, Ravel is again able to use the different colours of the orchestra to distinguish the melodic

¹³ This indication requires the performer to play with the bow on the fingerboard. The resulting sound emphasizes the fundamental, and has a soft, hazy quality to it. Note that the resulting sound is gossamer, mysterious, and fantastical, which constitutes a perfect representation of the mythological creature portrayed in his movement. After all, folklore tells us that the Gnome, who lives in the depths of the earth is a very mysterious creature.

¹⁴ See footnote 9.

antecedent from the detached consequent¹⁵, whereas Mussorgsky is limited to staccato versus legato articulation to illustrate the same division.

Ballet des poussins dans leurs coques weighs heavily in favour of Ravel's orchestration. Besides the simple fact that a flute is much more capable of sounding like a bird, the colouristic variation offered by the different timbres of the woodwind section affirms the inferiority of the piano as a medium for this piece. In the orchestration, Ravel is able to separate the top voice (played by the flutes) from the chords (played by the oboes, clarinets, and harp), thus emancipating the chirping of the chicks from the supporting harmonies. At the same time, he doubles the melody (grace note omitted) in the first oboe and the harp. This variety of colours gives the impression that there are several chicks chirping, and not just one as the piano version implies. Furthermore, in the trio section, the trills (played by the first violins) do not overpower the continuous chirping of the chicks (played by the flutes) as they do in the piano version. Ravel also uses the greater possibilities of the orchestral medium to ensure the effectiveness of this hierarchy. By maintaining the flute as the principle 'chirping' instrument, Ravel forces one to associate this instrument with the sound of the chicks. The effect is drastically different from that produced by Mussorgsky's version, which draws the ear exclusively to the trills.

Of the next piece in the series, the title alone requires some discussion. The commonly used heading *Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuyle* does not appear in Paul Lamm's authoritative edition of Mussorgsky's works, nor is it justified by anything in the catalogue of Hartmann's works. In fact, reading from the manuscripts, one will find that this is the only movement without a title given by the composer.¹⁶ For the purpose of this dissertation, Stasov's description of the piece as "two Polish Jews, one rich, the other poor" will be used.

Ravel's clever choice of instrumentation in this movement intensifies the drastic difference in class and stature between the two Jews represented. A full body of strings is used to depict the wealthy one of the two characters. The strength of this sound alone could never be reproduced on the piano; however, Ravel chooses to further intensify it by notating *sul sol* in the violin part. The G-string on the

¹⁵ The terms antecedent and consequent are used very loosely here. They are simply meant to indicate that a melody is sounded, and then answered to by a seemingly different voice.

¹⁶ See Alfred Frankenstein. 'Victor Hartmann and Modeste Mussorgsky.' *Music Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Jul., 1939), 285.

violin is the thickest and most sonorous of the four. By adding an English horn, two clarinets, a bass clarinet, and two bassoons to the string section, Ravel rounds off the symbol of strength with a colouristic richness that is never equalled by the instrumentation representing the poor Jew. The trumpet, marked *con sordino*, represents the pleading of the poorer of the two characters. With the addition of two oboes, it can be said that Ravel consciously introduced the two new instruments (not used in the opening) to differentiate between the characters. As the poor Jew's pleading intensifies, the instruments used in the opening successively re-enter (perhaps symbolizing the poor character's rising affluence). Although Mussorgsky successfully represents this contrast in social class by extremities in register and dynamics, Ravel's orchestration has the benefit of associating specific instruments with certain characters. It is no coincidence that an entire section is devoted to the rich Jew, whereas a single instrument serves the poor one. It may also be mentioned that the repeated triplet patterns in the *Andantino* section are not particularly idiomatic for the piano.

The happenings of the seventh picture of the set, entitled *Limoges. Le marché (la grande nouvelle)* are more accurately portrayed in Ravel's orchestration. The concept of this movement is quite similar to that put forth in *Tuileries*. Both movements represent conversations; one being physical (*Tuileries*) and the other verbal (*Limoges*). Intended to depict "Frenchwomen furiously disputing in the marketplace", Mussorgsky's version seems almost contradictory, namely because the voices almost always move together, and the respective register of the right and left hand are always in close proximity to one another. In other words, no sense of conversation (disputing) is achieved. The opening measures of Ravel's orchestration of *Limoges* provide a prime example of how he uses the variety of the orchestra to enhance the realism desired by Mussorgsky. In the orchestral arrangement, the different sections of the melody (defined by different articulations in the original) are given, not only to different instruments, but also to different instrumental families. The opening measure is presented by the horns, and followed by the first violin in the second measure, which is then joined by the flutes half way through.

The penultimate movement of the piece, *The Hut on Fowls' Legs (Baba-Yaga)*, is modelled after "Hartmann's drawing depicting a clock in the form of Baba-Yaga's hut on fowls' legs." Stasov also notes that, "Mussorgsky added Baba-yaga's flight in a mortar." Baba-Yaga, the fearsome witch with iron teeth, is a legacy of Russian folklore. She lives deep in the forest, in a hut that can move about on its extra-large chicken legs. When moving through the forest, the hut constantly spins around emitting

blood-chilling screams until a secret incantation is uttered, and the hut becomes eerily still. Whenever Baba-Yaga herself appears, a ferocious wind begins to blow, and the whole of nature becomes disturbed.¹⁷

Musically, the problem is similar to that of the poor Jew's motive; the writing is simply not idiomatic¹⁸ for the piano. Not much needs to be said about how Ravel's orchestration of *Pictures* achieves a greater sense of realism in this movement. The orchestral forces are far more suitable to create an atmosphere of chaos, as is presented in the A and A' sections of *Baba-Yaga*. In the B section, marked *Andante mosso*, Ravel maintains the sense of stillness (this is the hut at rest) in two ways. Firstly, he restricts himself to three different instruments (flute, bassoon, and contrabass) for the first seven measures. When the tension builds again, beginning in the eighth measure of the *Andante mosso* section, Ravel slowly introduces more forces, but maintains the soft dynamic. Secondly, by separating the accompaniment from the melody, Ravel eliminates the inherent tension of the original that results from the piano having to play both elements.

The grand finale of the suite, *The Great Gate of Kiev*, is the only movement based on one of Hartmann's architectural sketches. "Hartmann's sketch was his design for city gates at Kiev in the ancient Russian massive style with a cupola shaped like a Slavonic helmet."¹⁹ The movement is dominated by the brass section, which achieves a sound more grand and clear than any piano ever could. For example, in the section marked *energico*, beginning at m.47, the scales played by the string do not intrude upon the grandiose theme, as they do when played in octaves on the piano. Furthermore, the contrast between the forte brass sections, and the *senza espressione* sections (marked *piano*) played by the clarinets and bassoons is several times more effective than the contrast achieved on the piano. Lastly, in the *Meno mosso, sempre maestoso* section, Ravel changes the original meter from 2/2 to 3/2. Also, he sustains the melody in the woodwinds and brass, while the strings play the repeated chords. In Mussorgsky's version, the triplets seem to obscure the melody unnecessarily. In all, Ravel attains a much broader sound, and an unprecedented clarity; both, essential elements to depict the grandeur of the gate.

¹⁷ See Elizabeth Warner. *Heroes, Monsters and Other Worlds from Russian Mythology*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1996.

¹⁸ The constant octave leaps in the left-hand are very difficult for any pianist to execute convincingly at the *Allegro con brio* tempo.

¹⁹ M.D. Calvocoressi. *Mussorgsky*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1919.

The three movements, *Il Vecchio Castello*, *Bydlo*, and *Catacombae*, were not mentioned above, either because they detract from, or are inconsequential to the aesthetic of realism sought by Mussorgsky. A brief note on each should suffice to provide the rationale behind their exclusion.

Stassov described *Il Vecchio Castello* as, “a medieval castle before which a troubadour sings a song.” Ravel begins by giving the *espressivo* melody to the bassoons. At m.8, a saxophone responds to the opening melody with one of its own. Throughout the movement, there is a constant dialogue between these two instruments, and eventually the violins (m.30), oboes (m.36), flutes (m.39), clarinets (m.42), and the English horn (m.52). Although Ravel’s orchestration is very clever, it works against the sense of realism; the dialogue suggests that more than one person is singing.²⁰

The movement entitled *Bydlo* (Polish for ‘cattle’) depicts “a Polish cart on enormous wheels, drawn by oxen.” This movement, in its original form, begins with alternating chords in the low register of the piano that lack clarity as a result. Ravel’s orchestration gives these chords to the low strings (violincello and contrabasso), and notates a *portato* articulation, which causes for a much clearer sound than that produced in the low range of the piano. Seemingly problematic at first, this muddy piano sonority comes as a blessing in disguise. As Laurence Davies points out, “since the music is intended to depict the lumbering up and eventual disappearance of a Polish oxcart, all this undifferentiated sound serves to strengthen the massive, tuneless grinding of the cart’s wheels and the ultimate substitution of silence for noise.”²¹

Catacombae is a depiction of “Hartmann himself examining the Paris catacombs by the light of a lantern.” The numerous fermatas in combination with the subject of this movement, proves to be perfectly suited to the piano. The natural decay that occurs on this instrument, immediately after a pitch is sounded, embodies the very sound of a crypt. Moreover, the resonance of the sound proves analogous to the echoes that characterize the stereotypical perception of being in a tomb.

²⁰ It may be suggested that the changes in instrumentation reflect the fluctuation of moods expressed by the troubadour; however, this in itself would show that Ravel used his own interpretation (this word in itself contradicts the philosophy of realism) to set the work. Other similar suggestions could also be refuted using the same principle.

²¹ See Laurence Davies. *Ravel Orchestral Music*. London: BBC, 1970.

The answer to the question of whether or not Mussorgsky would have approved of an orchestral version of *Pictures at an Exhibition* will never be known for sure. Nonetheless, something can be said concerning one particular orchestration of the Russian composer's most famous work. The orchestral version completed by Maurice Ravel enhances Mussorgsky's most fundamental philosophy concerning music; that of realism. Of the ten pictures that constitute the piece, seven benefit significantly from the French composer's arrangement in terms of the compositional philosophy at hand. Even so, what is perhaps most important of all, is that no analysis of any kind can place one version of the piece above the other with absolute certainty. This will remain, as always, a matter of taste. What can be confidently stated, however, is that Mussorgsky's original creation, with its unique harmonies and fascinating program, will continue to excite the minds of scholars for years to come.

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