



Stephen De Pledge Pictures at an Exhibition



Mussorgsky
Beethoven
Brahms



I FOREWORD

I have had the very great pleasure of giving many concerts and recording several discs in the wonderful Music Room at Champs Hill in West Sussex. The idyllic rural setting, beautiful building and fine instrument are inspirations in themselves, but it is the paintings on the walls that struck me from the outset. There is something magical about being surrounded by such a variety of wonderful paintings, and I would often find myself staring mesmerised at a particular image on the wall while playing. So the choice to record Mussorgsky's great work about pictures was an obvious one – it is also a piece I love to play, for its quicksilver changes of character and its extraordinary and precise tone-painting on the piano. The choice of what to place alongside it was more difficult, but I chose two equally strongly characterized works – the revolutionary and powerful 'Pathétique' sonata of Beethoven, and the two Rhapsodies of Brahms – interestingly, written at almost the same time as 'Pictures at an Exhibition'.

Stephen De Pledge

MUSSORGSKY | PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

1	Promenade	1.19
2	Gnomus	2.27
3	Promenade	0.46
4	The Old Castle	4.14
5	Promenade	0.27
6	The Tuileries Gardens	1.01
7	Bydlo	3.10
8	Promenade	0.43
9	Ballet of the Chickens in Their Shells	1.17
10	Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle	2.05
11	Promenade	1.18
12	The Marketplace at Limoges	1.32
13	The Catacombs (Sepulchrum romanum)	3.48
14	The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)	3.29
15	The Great Gate of Kiev	4.52

BEETHOVEN | PIANO SONATA NO.8 IN C MINOR, OP.13 "PATHÉTIQUE"

16	Grave – Allegro di molto e con brio	10.57
17	Adagio cantabile	4.45
18	Rondo (Allegro)	4.46

BRAHMS

19	2 Rhapsodies, op.79: No.1	9.13
20	2 Rhapsodies, op.79: No.2	6.46

Produced & engineered by Alexander Van Ingen
Edited by Dave Rowell
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Photographs of Stephen de Pledge by Jack Liebeck

REPERTOIRE NOTES

Beethoven – Brahms – Mussorgsky

It's a mere truism to say that Beethoven, Brahms and Mussorgsky were hugely important composers for the piano; but the nature of their achievements and the extent of their contributions were very different. Beethoven's copious keyboard output centred on his majestic series of 32 sonatas, a genre he developed out of 18th-century classical decorum to encompass some of the profoundest statements and most radical structural and stylistic innovations in musical history. Brahms, ever the latecomer in his own estimation, soon saw that Beethoven had left him little to do in the sonata genre; after his very early efforts in that direction he concentrated instead on variations and, especially, the short lyric or dramatic piece, expressing deep feeling and compressing much thought and substance into a small space. Mussorgsky's characteristic genius lay elsewhere, primarily in opera. His pianistic output is partly lost, and what survives is a collection of mainly short genre pieces or occasional works – but it is dominated by one mighty utterance full of significance for future Russian (and French) composers. *Pictures at an Exhibition* presents an unparalleled wealth of atmosphere, colour and pictorial suggestion, achieved through what were essentially new ways of writing for the piano.

It's perhaps only a reflection on the susceptibilities of his audience that the best-known of Beethoven's sonatas tend to be the ones with titles – though mostly these were assigned by others, and for reasons extraneous to the music. At least the title 'Pathétique' for Piano Sonata No.8 in C minor, op.13, comes from Beethoven himself – or at any rate, he assented to the work being printed with the title *Grande Sonate Pathétique*, which his publisher suggested because he considered nothing in pianoforte music had been so powerful and so full of tragic passion. This notable work is a production of Beethoven's early years in Vienna, completed in 1797 or 1798, and the published version appeared at the end of 1799

with a dedication to the composer's friend Prince Carl Lichnowsky. The Sonata is a classic expression of Beethoven's temperamental affinity for the key of C minor, a tonality he used to express urgency, dynamic drive, the inevitable force of fate and the individual's resistance to it. The most famous expression of this complex of 'Beethoven in C minor' associations is the Fifth Symphony, but he had already written striking works in that key – such as the Piano Trio op.1 no.3 – and the *Sonate Pathétique* expresses a similar mood with remarkable cogency and force. It is nevertheless possible that Beethoven's sonata was inspired by one of Mozart's – K. 457, written in 1784 and likewise in C minor, with three movements of roughly similar character to Beethoven's.

The 'genre pathétique' had already been recognized as a province of musical drama by the early 18th century, especially in France and Italy, and was generally associated with slow tempi employed to evoke strong passions and especially sadness or grief. But there were no actual rules or technical features that defined such 'pathetic' expression, which was more to be sensed in the overall character of a piece. Rousseau, in 1768, had written that 'the true pathétique lies in the passionate stress, not determined by rules, which genius finds and the heart feels, although Art can in no way provide a law'. Beethoven's C minor Sonata would seem a vindication of Rousseau's definition.

The first movement is prefaced by a very slow, deliberate introductory passage, marked *Grave* – it was presumably this, and the unusually dramatic use that Beethoven makes of this music at further junctures in the movement, that suggested the epithet *Pathétique* in the first place. At first almost numb and still, this introduction develops something of the swing of a funeral march, but it serves principally to create expectation, fulfilled by the exposition of first movement proper. This, after the *Grave* pauses on the dominant of C minor, strikes in with a

very fast and fiery character, *Molto Allegro e con brio*, characterized at once by the urgent, thrumming *tremolo* writing in the left hand. The first theme takes flight in ascending staccato, balanced by descending chords, and modulates briskly to the second group in the relative major (E flat), a more extended affair comprising three distinct ideas. First comes a tune of some lyric pathos, though at the same fast pace, imitated between the hands; then an upward surge from the bass, driving to a climax; then a closing passage of floridly rippling figuration followed by a *codetta* based on the first theme.

This short exposition is then repeated: there has been some debate as to whether Beethoven intended a repeat, but he generally did at this stage of his career and it makes sense to observe it as it intensifies the feeling of surprise when after the *codetta* the slow *Grave* music returns in the comparatively distant key of E minor, injecting its note of tragedy and pathos. (It is also uncertain whether Beethoven intended a repeat not only of the *Allegro* exposition but also of the prefatory *Grave*. In this recording Stephen de Pledge takes this course, so that the E minor version at the start of the development is actually the third time the *Grave* has been heard, further intensifying the 'pathetic' character of the movement as a whole.) The music then returns forcibly to *Molto allegro* for a swift-moving development that sounds almost feverish in its enhanced urgency. It passes seamlessly into the recapitulation, with the second group now appearing first in F minor but working round to the tonic C minor, where the music builds to a drastic, rhetorical climax, breaking off on two explosive diminished chords. Then for a third time we hear the lamenting music of the *Grave*, a spectre that interposes itself before the brief, curt flourish of the *coda*.

The second and third movements, unusually, are both in *rondo* form. The straightforward lyricism of the *Adagio cantabile*, with its serene main theme that

appears first in the instrument's tenor register, is one of the principal reasons for the popularity of this sonata. The movement is in a rich, warm A flat, making a perfect foil to the chilly and hectic C minor of the first movement. A passage of florid decoration leads to a reprise of the theme and a move to the minor for a contrasting melody with a staccato triplet accompaniment. The triplet rhythms persist in the accompaniment as the main theme is recalled. A hint of vocal decoration embellishes the serene cadences of the *coda*.

Beethoven's sketches show that the *rondo finale* was originally planned as a *rondo* for piano accompanied by another instrument, perhaps a violin, and some commentators have felt that it does not altogether belong with the other two movements. Nevertheless it makes a splendid conclusion, and its key-scheme – the second theme in E flat and the third in A flat – neatly summarizes the tonal progress of movements 1 and 2. In character this *Allegro* is a slightly gentler movement than the first, though its rapid figurations give plenty of opportunities for bravura playing, and the highly memorable *rondo* theme is not without a certain anxiety appropriate to the C minor tonality. The second theme, appearing first in E flat, reappears after stormy developments in C major, which seems to promise a hopeful ending; but the prospect vanishes in the final *coda*, with the fragmentation of the *rondo* theme and a plunging downward scale, bringing a brusquely definitive conclusion in the minor mode.

The two collections of piano pieces which Johannes Brahms published in 1879-80 – the *8 Klavierstücke, op.76* and the *2 Rhapsodies, op.79* – were his first solo piano works since the *Paganini Variations* of 15 years earlier and marked an important change of direction for him as a piano composer. There were to be no more large sets of variations, still less multi-movement sonatas. Instead, lyric and philosophical (and also dramatic) miniatures: pieces whose comparatively small dimensions are far

outweighed by the density and personal quality of their expression. Fewer and fewer notes come to stand for richer and richer substance.

The *Rhapsodies* are very compressed. In fact 'rhapsody' seems rather a misnomer: there is nothing arbitrary or improvisational in their structural make-up. But, encompassing as they do a wide range of mood in a small space, they might almost be considered as extremely concise one-movement sonatas – though only the G minor Rhapsody is actually in sonata form. The B minor, the longer of the two, is a curious mixture of sonata background and ternary foreground, its fiery outer sections having two distinct subjects while the highly contrasted middle section, in B major, is based a gentle, berceuse-like *espressivo* melody that nevertheless derives from the second of these subjects.

The G minor work is tauter in structure but exploratory in harmony, the passionate first subject climbing in effortful steps and bursting into turbulent rhythmic activity, continuously roving with little inclination to establish the primacy of the key of G. Although the development section begins similarly freely, Brahms creates the necessary sense of return by constructing an hypnotic, fatefully muttering internal pedal on the dominant (deriving from a triplet figure in the funeral-march-like second subject). This builds up unremittingly in dynamic force from *ppp sotto voce* beginnings, and by its very persistence it demands that the resolution be in G. The same figure is the focus for the *coda*, in which the second-subject ideas undergo a gradual, shadowed liquidation, full of a mysterious sense of tragedy.

A few years earlier, in 1873, Modest Mussorgsky was deeply affected by the sudden death at the age of 39 of his great friend Alexandrovitch Hartmann (1834-73), a visionary painter and architect of Volga German ancestry whom he had probably met first in 1870 through the agency of the critical standard-bearer of Russian nationalism in art, Vladimir Stassov. In February 1874 an exhibition of over

400 works by Hartmann, arranged by Stasov at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts, inspired Mussorgsky (who had lent some of his own Hartmann material for display) to compose *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which he subtitled 'a Remembrance of Victor Hartmann'. Hartmann was a dedicated Slavophile artist: he had been associated with the Abramtsevo Colony, an estate near Moscow where Russian artists met to discuss ways of ridding Russian art and architecture of Western influences, and with the Russian Revival movement in architecture. Hartmann's concerns in art and architecture therefore paralleled those of Mussorgsky and his friends Balakirev, Borodin, Cui and Rimsky-Korsakov – collectively the 'Mighty Five' – in music.

Composed in a mere six weeks, but unpublished until after his death in 1881, this is by far Mussorgsky's most important composition for piano solo. Eleven pictures, illustrated in ten separate movements, are connected by the *Promenade*, a theme which leads us through the gallery from one picture to the next. Some of Hartmann's original pictures are now lost, but six have been identified with the movements of Mussorgsky's suite. It should be noted that No. 6, a double portrait, seems to be based on two separate pictures, and that it was Mussorgsky's own idea to combine them in a single movement as contrasted character-pieces.

Though the idea of pieces of music inspired by particular paintings was not new, the concept of, as it were, an entire gallery as the basis of a suite had few predecessors. Mussorgsky may, however, have taken note of the set of 24 'musical portraits' for piano by Anton Rubinstein, composed in 1853-4 under the title *Kamennyi-Ostrov* (Rocky Island) at the palace of the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlova, intended as a gallery of character-studies of the members of her court.

The piece begins with the *Promenade*, a formal and somewhat ponderous theme with a pronounced Russian folksong character. It recurs after movements 1, 2 and 4 and

6, and is incorporated in No. 8 in transfigured form. Its uneven metre, alternating between 5/4 and 6/4 (Mussorgsky actually wrote it first in 11/4), and its full-bodied B flat major, seemingly depict the portly composer himself as he moves from picture to picture. But the *Promenade* is also the ultimate source of the suite's other themes, providing various two-note or three-note figures from which those themes spring. In a very specialized sense, therefore, the entire work could be viewed as a theme and variations. The sequence of the 'pictures' is as follows:

1. *Gnomus*, E flat minor. The music depicts a gnome running on crooked legs (Hartmann's picture was a design for a gnome-shaped nutcracker). After a reprise of the *Promenade* in A flat we come to
2. *II Vecchio Castello* ('The Old Castle'), G sharp minor. A troubadour sings before a medieval castle. A brief recall of the *Promenade* in B major prefaces
3. *Tuileries. Disput d'enfants après jeux*, B major This depicts the famous Paris gardens, bustling with nursemaids and squabbling children.
4. *Bydlo*, G sharp minor. A Polish ox-cart rolls along on enormous wheels. A grave D minor version of the *Promenade* prepares for
5. *Ballet des Poussins dans leur Coques* ('Ballet of Chicks in their Shells'), F major. Hartmann's picture shows sketches of some costume designs for a ballet. To be precise, the chicks were baby canaries, and the design was for *Trilby, The Demon of the Heath*, a ballet composed by Julius Gerber with choreography by Petipa and décor by Hartmann, based on Charles Nodiet's play *Trilby*, or the *Elf of Argyle*, which was staged at the Bolshoi Theatre in St Petersburg in 1871. The movement is a tiny *scherzo*, with a central trio and *coda*.
6. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle* sometimes called (by Stasov and others) *Two Jews, Rich and Poor*, though the former title is in Mussorgsky's manuscript.

(Later editors sometimes call them 'Polish Jews'). B flat minor. As mentioned above, this is a double portrait probably based on two separate pictures by Hartmann. Musically, one character is arrogant and austere with an oriental Hassidic flavour, the other is pathetic with its importunate whining repeated notes. (The Yiddish name Schmuyle is the origin of the American-Jewish term 'a schmiel', a hapless victim of a heartless society: it was Mussorgsky who gave the character this name, for Hartmann's picture of the poor Jew calls him Sandomir.) After both themes have been stated they are combined in counterpoint. Mussorgsky then provides an almost exact reprise of the *Promenade*, in its original B flat major.

7. *Limoges – Le Marché* ('Limoges – The Market Place'). E flat: another *scherzo*. The French market-women in this clatteringly rhythmic piece are said (in a lively description, complete with French dialogue, which Mussorgsky wrote into his autograph manuscript and then crossed out) to be gossiping about a lost cow, a drunken neighbour and some false teeth.
8. *Catacombae* (Sepulchrum Romanum in the manuscript), B minor. This is the mystic heart of Mussorgsky's design. In the picture referred to, Hartmann depicted himself probing the mysteries of the tombs (not Roman tombs, in fact: his picture is set in the catacombs of Paris) by the light of a lantern, echoed by sepulchral sonorities in the piano. The movement is in two parts: in the section that follows, headed *Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua* ('With the Dead, in a Dead Language'), the key changes to B major as Moussorgsky figuratively picks up the lantern and continues the quest with a spectral, quasi-religious transformation of the *Promenade* tune. He wrote in the manuscript 'A latin text would be suitable: the creative soul of the dead Hartmann leads me to the skulls, invokes them, the skulls shine softly'. At this point it could be said that the distinction between the observer and the picture observed is entirely dissolved.

9. *La Cabane sur des Pattes de Poule* (Baba-Yaga) ('The Hut on Fowls Legs'), C minor. This the third *scherzo*, in the form of a brilliant grotesque march. Hartmann designed a clock in the form of the hut in which dwelt the mythical witch of Russian folklore, *Baba-Yaga*. To this idea Mussorgsky added a hint of the tale of the witch's flight in an iron mortar, which she propels with a pestle. The music is a brilliant transformation of the materials of *Gnomus*.
10. *La Grande Porte de Kiev* ('The Great Gate of Kiev'). The design for the Bogatyr or Heroes' Gate in the city of Kiev, was commissioned in 1866 but was never built. Hartmann's gate, planned as a monument to Tsar Alexander II's narrow escape from assassination that year, was in ancient Russian style, with a cupola shaped like a Slavic war helmet. Mussorgsky's *finale*, based on a triumphant variant of the *Promenade* theme and bringing it to an apotheosis, is also 'in ancient Russian style' and brings the suite to a climactic conclusion with pealing bell-effects that recall the coronation pageantry of the composer's opera Boris Godunov.

In these pieces, Moussorgsky had produced a new style of piano writing which deeply influenced later composers. (Debussy, for one: his famous prelude *La Cathédrale Engloutie* would be unthinkable without 'The Great Gate of Kiev'. And Ravel, for another: who can imagine *Le Gibet* without 'Gnomus', or *Scarbo* without 'Schmuyle')? The original edition, published in 1886, was heavily edited by his friend Rimsky-Korsakov, and was eventually superseded in a revised critical edition in 1931. But it long laboured under the reputation of being 'unpianistic', and though often performed in Russia was comparatively seldom heard in Western Europe until the 1960s.

New Zealand pianist Stephen De Pledge is one of the most exciting and versatile musicians of his generation. He studied at the University of Auckland, and then with Joan Havill at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. His career was launched after winning the Gold Medal from the Guildhall, and the NFMS Young Concert Artists' Award, and he has since maintained a diverse and wide-ranging performing schedule, as soloist, chamber musician and song accompanist.

Stephen's solo performances have taken him throughout the UK, including five solo recitals in the Wigmore Hall in London, where he made his acclaimed debut in 1999. He has also given solo performances in Hong Kong, Italy, France, Singapore, Japan, Australia and the USA. Concerto appearances include the Philharmonia (London) and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestras, and performances in the Barbican and Fairfield halls. He has recorded solo works of Bliss, Messiaen and Arvo Pärt, for whom he made the world premiere recording of the piano sonatas. He also made the premiere recording of the 4 Piano Preludes of Gorecki.

As a chamber musician, Stephen has collaborated with groups such as Chamber Domaine, the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet, the English Chamber Orchestra Ensemble and the Scottish Ensemble. Recent chamber music performances have been in New York, Dresden, Bogotá, Shanghai, Paris and Beijing, and he has performed at many International Festivals in the UK and abroad.

Stephen's repertoire is far-reaching, from the music of the 17th to the 21st centuries. He has always been an advocate for contemporary music, and has given the world premiere performances of many works. In 2001 he performed the



complete chamber works of Arvo Pärt during the Edinburgh Festival, under the guidance of the composer, and he has become particularly associated with the music of Messiaen, which he studied in Paris with the composer's widow, Yvonne Loriod. In 2008 he gave the first performance of the 'Landscape Preludes', twelve new works by New Zealand composers, at the International Festival in Wellington.

In addition to his solo recordings, Stephen's recordings for Sanctuary Classics, ASV, Quartz and Landor and Champs Hill Records labels include song cycles by Ned Rorem and Samuel

Barber, and chamber music of Messiaen, Shostakovich, Schnittke and Pärt. He has broadcast for Radio 3 and Classic FM in the UK, and also on radio in USA, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden, and for BBC Television.