Program Notes

PRE-CONCERT

Pictures at an Exhibition
MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Born: 1839
Died: 1881
Composed: 1874

[Promenade I]
I. The Gnome
[Promenade II]
II. The Old Castle
[Promenade III]
III. Tuileries (Children's Quarrel after Games)
IV. Cattle
[Promenade IV]
V. Ballet of Unhatched Chicks
VI. Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuÿle
[Promenade V]
VII. Limoges. The Market (The Great News)
VIII. Catacombs (Roman Tomb)
IX. The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)
X. The Bogatyr Gates (The Great Gates of Kiev)

In the summer of 1873, Modest Mussorgsky was stunned by the sudden death of his friend Victor Hartmann, an architect and artist who was then only 39. The following year, their mutual friend Vladimir Stasov arranged a showing of over 400 of Hartmann's watercolors, sketches, drawings, and designs. Inspired by the exhibition and the memory of his friend, Mussorgsky set to work on a suite of piano pieces based on the pictures and wrote enthusiastically to Stasov: "Hartmann is bubbling over, just as Boris did. Ideas, melodies, come to me of their own accord, like the roast pigeons in the story—I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to put it all down on paper fast enough." He worked fast indeed: beginning on June 2, 1874, Mussorgsky had the score complete three weeks later, on June 22, just a few months after the premiere of Boris Godunov.

The finished work, which he called Pictures at an Exhibition, consists of ten musical portraits bound together by a promenade theme that recurs periodically—Mussorgsky said that this theme, meant to depict the gallery-goer strolling between paintings, was a portrait of himself. Curiously, Pictures spent its first half-century in obscurity. It was not performed publically during Mussorgsky's lifetime, it was not published until 1886 (five years after its composer's death), and did not really enter the standard piano repertory until several decades after that: the earliest recording of the piano version did not take place until 1942. Even early listeners were struck by the "orchestral" sonorities of this piano score, and in 1922 conductor Serge Koussevitzky asked Maurice Ravel to orchestrate it. Koussevitzky gave the first performance of Ravel's version at the Paris Opera on October 19, 1922, and it quickly became one of the most popular works in the orchestral repertory. This recital offers the rare opportunity to hear this familiar music performed in its original version.

The opening Promenade alternates 5/4 and 6/4 meters; Mussorgsky marks it "in the Russian manner." The Gnome is a portrait of a gnome staggering on twisted legs; the following Promenade is marked "with delicacy." In Hartmann's watercolor The Old Castle, a minstrel sings before a ruined castle, and his mournful song rocks along over an incessant G-sharp minor pedal. Tuileries is a watercolor of children playing and quarreling in the Paris park, while Bydlo returns to Eastern Europe, where a heavy ox-cart grinds through the mud. The wheels pound ominously along as the driver sings; the music rises to a strident climax as the cart draws near and passes, then diminishes as the cart moves on. Mussorgsky wanted the following Promenade to sound tranquillo, but gradually this Promenade takes on unexpected power. The Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks depicts Hartmann's costume design for the ballet Trilby, in which these characters wore egg-shaped armor—Mussorgsky echoes the sound of the chicks with chirping grace notes.

Listeners who know Pictures only in the Ravel orchestration will be surprised to find this movement followed by another Promenade; Ravel cut this from his orchestral version, which is a pity, because this appearance of the Promenade brings a particularly noble incarnation of that theme. The Marketplace at Limoges shows Frenchwomen quarreling furiously in a market, while Catacombs is Hartmann's portrait of himself surveying the Roman catacombs by lantern light. This section leads into Cum mortuis in lingua mortua: "With the dead in a dead language." Mussorgsky noted of this section: "The spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me to the skulls and invokes them: the skulls begin to glow faintly"; embedded in this spooky passage is a minor-key variation of the Promenade theme. The Hut on Fowl's Legs shows the hut (perched on hen's legs) of the vicious witch Baba Yaga, who would fly through the skies in a red-hot mortar—Mussorgsky has her fly scorchingly right into the final movement, The Great Gate of Kiev. Hartmann had designed a gate (never built) for the city of Kiev, and Mussorgsky's brilliant finale transforms the genial Promenade theme into a heaven-storming conclusion.

CONCERT

Two Pieces for String Octet, Op. 11

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: 1906
Died: 1975
Composed: 1925

I. Prelude. Allegro
II. Scherzo. Allegro molto

When Shostakovich died in 1975, he was remembered primarily as a symphonist, but the last several decades have seen new interest in his chamber music, particularly his impressive cycle of fifteen string quartets. Shostakovich came to the string quartet relatively late in life—he did not write his first until he was in his thirties—but as a very young man he had experimented with chamber music, composing a piano trio at 17 and the Two Pieces for String Octet at 18, while he was still a conservatory student.

From this same period came Shostakovich's dazzling First Symphony, Opus 10, and in fact he worked on the symphony and the Two Pieces simultaneously. The Two Pieces are in the same neo-classical manner as the symphony. Shostakovich scored this music for string octet, specifically the same double string quartet that another teenaged composer, Felix Mendelssohn, had used in his Octet. The form can seem strange: this brilliant, bittersweet music consists of two contrasting and unrelated movements, both characterized by high energy levels.

Composed in December 1924, the Prelude is dominated by the powerful sequence of ominous chords heard at the very beginning. This movement is episodic, with sharply contrasting passages for muted triplets, pizzicato chords, and a virtuoso part for the first violin before closing on a quiet unison D. The Scherzo, written in July 1925, is much more acerbic. It too is episodic, though here the thematic material tends to be short and angular. The fiery main idea, announced by the

first violin, rushes this movement to its sudden, powerful close.

The Two Pieces for String Octet were first performed in Moscow on January 9, 1927, by the combined Gliere and Stradivarius Quartets.

Cello Sonata in A minor, Op. 36
EDVARD GRIEG
Born: 1843
Died: 1907
Composed: 1883

I. Allegro agitato
II. Andante molto tranquillo
III. Allegro molto e marcato

Edvard Grieg will be forever identified as a "nationalist" composer, dedicated to evoking his Norwegian heritage and to advancing the cause of Norwegian music, and the popularity of works like the Peer Gynt Suite or Wedding Day at Troldhaugen will probably be eternal. And justly so. Yet Grieg felt the pull of "classical" music throughout his life, and he returned continually to the classical forms, forms that were still being used by Grieg's good friend Johannes Brahms. Among the works of this supposedly nationalist composer are a symphony, one of the most popular piano concertos ever written, a string quartet, three violin sonatas, a piano sonata, and the present Cello Sonata in A minor, composed in 1882–83, just as Grieg was approaching his fortieth birthday. The Cello Sonata fuses standard three-movement classical form with some of the characteristics of Grieg's specifically "Norwegian" music: short and repetitive phrases, sudden major-minor alternations, and dance rhythms. It is a big, passionate work, full of good tunes and fire, and today it is acknowledged as a masterpiece of the genre.

Grieg marks the first movement Allegro agitato, and the very beginning is certainly dramatic. The agitation here comes largely from the piano, whose swirling accompaniment and sudden outbursts give the opening much of its character; all this energy sets the cello's lovely second subject in high relief. The turbulent development is once again energized by the piano, though Grieg pauses briefly at one point to give the cello a cadenza of its own. The conclusion of this movement is faintly reminiscent, in its rhythms and gestures, of the opening theme of Grieg's own Piano Concerto.

The Andante molto tranquillo contains a much more direct reminiscence: its gentle main idea is a variant of the Huldigungsmarsch ("Homage March") of Grieg's incidental music to Sigurd Jorsalfar, composed in 1872. Here this noble tune is driven to an animated climax before subsiding to the quiet close. A brief introduction leads directly to the main theme of the Allegro molto e marcato, very much in the manner of the elf-dances of Grieg's nationalistic music. The piano introduces the symmetric little main tune, full of repetitive rhythms and surprising harmonic colors; the piano also has the soaring second subject, and both these ideas are treated at some length before the exciting close.

Grieg developed a comfortable calendar for his creative work and stuck with it throughout his career. He composed in the spring and early summer, then used the fall and winter to tour Europe, conducting concerts and presenting his music (and the music of other Norwegian composers). It was on a European tour in the fall of 1883 that Grieg played the piano in the first performances of the Cello Sonata; the cellists on those occasions were the distinguished German virtuosos Friedrich Grützmacher and Julius Klengel. Late in his life, Grieg performed this sonata with one of the greatest of cellists: in Amsterdam on May 2, 1906, he played it with the young Pablo Casals.

Appalachian Spring ("Ballet for Martha")
Original complete ballet for 13 instruments
AARON COPLAND
Born: 1900
Died: 1990
Composed: 1944

Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring has become such a classic that it is surprising to learn that this ballet took shape rather haphazardly. Copland and Martha Graham had long wanted to work together before that opportunity came in 1942 when music

patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge commissioned three new dance works from Graham and gave the choreographer her choice of composers. One of those Graham chose was Copland, and they set to work. But their plans were unclear. It was wartime and Graham wanted a specifically American subject, but her initial thought of something that would include spoken text, an Indian girl, and the Civil War did not appeal to Copland. The composer went ahead with only a general sense of Graham's evolving scenarios. He began composition in June 1943 in Hollywood, where he was working on a film score, and completed the ballet the following summer in Cambridge, while teaching at Harvard; the orchestration was completed in Mexico.

Graham was delighted with Copland's music and adapted her choreography to fit his score (she in fact chose the title Appalachian Spring just weeks before the first performance, taking it from Hart Crane's poem The Bridge). For his part, Copland conceived this music specifically for Martha Graham rather than for her constantly-evolving plot-lines. "When I wrote Appalachian Spring, I was thinking primarily about Martha and her unique choreographic style, which I knew well. Nobody else seems quite like Martha: she's so proud, so very much herself. And she's unquestionably very American: there something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American." Copland's working title for this music was simply "Ballet for Martha" (and it still says that on the score's title page).

The premiere, at the Library of Congress in Washington on October 30, 1944, was a great success, and Copland's score was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Music Critics Circle Award the following year. Because the pit at the premiere was so small, Copland originally scored Appalachian Spring for an ensemble of only thirteen instruments: three woodwinds (flute, clarinet, bassoon), double string quartet, contrabass, and piano. In the spring of 1945, he arranged a suite from the ballet for full symphony orchestra, deleting about eight minutes from the original ballet, and this has become the best-known version of this music. However, many preferred the clarity and purity of Copland's original chamber orchestration, and so in 1958 he prepared a version of the suite for the original thirteen-instrument ensemble. This is the version performed at the present concert.

A note in the score outlines the subject of Appalachian Spring as Graham and Copland finally evolved it: the ballet tells of "a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house."

This scenario is rather simple, but the story is timeless, and Copland's wonderful music—glowing, fresh, strong—catches its mood perfectly. The action is easily followed. The opening section, which introduces the characters one by one, outlines the main theme of the ballet—a simple rising-and-falling shape—within a quiet haze of sound, and out of this bursts the general gathering: Copland portrays this with a jubilant A-Major explosion that suggests country fiddling. A hopping little episode for woodwinds is the dance of the Bride and her Intended, who look forward to their life together (there is a dark interlude here—not all of life will be happy). Suddenly the revivalist and his flock appear and help celebrate the wedding with a barn dance. The Solo Dance of the Bride, marked Presto, is her attempt to convey her complex feelings on this day, and this leads to one of the most striking moments in Appalachian Spring: Copland has a solo clarinet sing the Shaker melody "'Tis the Gift To Be Simple," and there follow five variations, each a vision of the married couple's life together. The last is stamped out triumphantly, and, then over prayer-like music from the strings, the Bride goes to take her place among her neighbors. The young couple is left together, "quiet and strong" as the ballet fades into silence on the music from the very beginning.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.