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CLASSICS

Pictures at an Exhibition

Llŷr Williams
Piano

Works by
Mussorgsky • Debussy • Liszt

PICTURES LLŶR WILLIAMS

Pictures at an Exhibition

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

1	Promenade	[1.37]
2	Gnomus (The Gnome)	[2.49]
3	Promenade	[0.55]
4	Il Vecchio Castello (The Old Castle)	[5.36]
5	Promenade	[0.34]
6	Tuileries (The Tuileries)	[1.01]
7	Bydlo	[3.12]
8	Promenade	[0.51]
9	Ballet des pouissins dans leur coques (Ballet of Chicks in their Shells)	[1.08]
10	Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle	[2.23]
11	Limoges - Le Marché (Limoges - The Market Place)	[1.27]
12	Catacombae (The Catacombs)	[2.18]
13	Cum mortuis in lingua mortua	[2.23]
14	La Cabane sur des Pattes de Poule, 'Baba-Yaga' (The Hut on Fowls Legs)	[3.29]
15	La Grande Porte de Kiev (The Great Gate of Kiev)	[5.51]

Estampes

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

16	Pagodes	[5.15]
17	La soirée dans Grenade	[5.50]
18	Jardins sous la pluie	[3.36]

19	Sposalizio	Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	[8.27]
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20	Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este	Franz Liszt	[8.15]
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21	Ave Maria, Die Glocken von Rom, S182	Franz Liszt	[6.45]
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Total Timings	[73.46]
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LLŶR WILLIAMS
PIANO

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Over the years composers of piano music have evolved a rich repertoire of musical techniques to suggest, or to symbolize, visual impressions. Almost all the music in this collection was inspired by, or seeks to evoke, a particular scene, or to supply a parallel experience to a painting or other work of art. Franz Liszt was especially prolific in this kind of parallelism: in some of his symphonic poems and in many of his piano works he conjures up landscapes, events, and the effect upon him of various art-works.

The three pieces by Liszt in this programme, for example, are all records of his travels in Italy. His first two collections of *Années de pèlerinage* were inspired by the scenes, art and literature that he encountered on his peregrinations through Switzerland and Italy (1835-39). It is the 'deuxième année' that concerns itself with Rome and Italy. *Sposalizio*, composed in 1839 and revised ten years later, was inspired by Raphael's painting 'The Marriage of the Virgin' in Milan. In fact, Liszt instructed that a copy of Raphael's painting, sketched by the artist Kretschmar, should be included in the first publication of the piece in 1858. The music reflects the tenderness and simplicity of Raphael's betrothal scene, but also the exalted religious feelings that it symbolizes. The work opens with a pentatonic motif that

becomes a vital element in the structure. The melody is transformed into a kind of wedding march, which is progressively embellished and leads up to a grand climax, after which the work ends quietly. Some of the sonorities do indeed look ahead to Debussy.

Les Jeux d'eau de la Villa d'Este comes from the much later 'troisième année' of *Années de pèlerinage*, composed between 1867-77 when Liszt was living in Rome. He did in fact stay at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli outside the city, with its famous water-gardens and fountains. The remarkably inventive study in keyboard patterns to depict the play of water is one of the most virtuosic pieces Liszt ever wrote, yet the virtuosity is not intrusive but completely subordinated to the act of evocation. This work too demonstrably inspired Debussy. Brilliant, rippling figures delineate the fountains in sparkling sunshine. Brief staccato passages suggest droplets and the jets of water dancing in sunlight. A pattern is presented in the piano's highest register, before the fountains are seen in their full glory with powerful chords and scales encompassing the entire range of the keyboard. Sparkling high notes and rippling bass patterns eventually depict the waters subsiding into a gentle repose. Liszt linked this water study to mystical reflections on the waters of

everlasting life, with a quotation from the Gospel of St John which he inserted over one section.

Coming chronologically between these two works is *Ave Maria, Die Glocken von Rom* (The Bells of Rome), which Liszt composed in the city in 1862. He wrote it for a series of piano tutors which was being prepared for use at the Stuttgart Conservatory, and while it tests virtuoso technique that technique is not used for mere display but to beautify the simple theme on which the work is based. The lyrical opening theme is soon presented against surging left-hand arpeggios and moves to the deep pedal points and throbbing rhythms of the solemn central section, which builds to a grand climax depicting the pealing of the bells of the many Roman churches. The work ends with a devotional 'Amen'.

In 1873, Modest Mussorgsky was deeply affected by the sudden death at the age of 39 of his great friend Victor Hartmann, 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 Stasov. In February of the following year 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 write *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, it 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 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. The work begins with the *Promenade*, a formal and somewhat ponderous theme with a pronounced Russian folksong character. It recurs after movements 1, 2, 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 2-note or 3-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:

Gnomus, E flat minor, 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 *Il 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 *Tuleries* (*Disput d'enfants après jeux*), B major. This evokes the Paris gardens, bustling with nursemaids and squabbling children.

In *Bydlo*, G sharp minor, a Polish ox-cart rolls along on enormous wheels. A grave D minor version of the *Promenade* prepares for *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, staged at the Bolshoi Theatre in St Petersburg in 1871. The movement is a tiny scherzo, with a central trio and coda.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle is 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. After both themes have been stated they are combined in counterpoint. We then move to *Limoges – Le Marché* ('Limoges – The Market Place'). E flat: another French 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.

The mystic heart of Mussorgsky's design is *Catacombae* (*Sepulchrum Romanum* in the manuscript), B minor. 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 Mussorgsky 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.

La Cabane sur des Pattes de Poule, 'Baba-Yaga' ('The Hut on Fowls Legs'), C minor. This is 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 in fact a brilliant transformation of the materials of *Gnomus*. The grand finale is provided by *La Grande Porte de Kiev* ('The Great Gate of Kiev'). This 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*.

The original edition of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, published in 1886 after Mussorgsky's death, 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. In these pieces, Mussorgsky had produced a new style of piano writing which deeply influenced later composers. One of those was Claude Debussy, who spent the summers of 1880-82 in Russia as pianist to Tchaikovsky's patron Nadezhda von Meck, when he absorbed a huge amount of contemporary Russian music. Many of Debussy's keyboard innovations were equally inspired by the piano works of Liszt, whom Debussy met in Rome in 1885 and heard play: he was especially impressed by Liszt's use of the pedals.

Estampes (Engravings) is the title of the triptych of three pieces which Debussy put together in 1903. The first complete performance was given on 9 January 1904 in the Salle Erard, Paris, by the young Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, who was already emerging as the prime interpreter of the new French music of Debussy and Ravel. The first two pieces were completed in 1903, but the third derives from an earlier group of pieces from 1894, collectively titled *Images*, which remained unpublished until 60 years after Debussy's death, when they were printed as *Images (oubliées)*. *Estampes* marks an expansion of Debussy's keyboard style: he was apparently spurred to fuse neo-Lisztian technique with a sensitive,

impressionistic pictorial impulse under the impact of discovering Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, published in 1902. The opening movement, 'Pagodes', is Debussy's first pianistic evocation of the Orient and is essentially a fixed contemplation of its object, as in a Chinese print. This static impression is partly caused by Debussy's use of long pedal-points, partly by his almost constant preoccupation with pentatonic melodies which subvert the sense of harmonic movement. He uses such pentatonic fragments in many different ways: in delicate arabesques, in two-part counterpoint, in canon, harmonized in fourths and fifths and as an underpinning for pattering, gamelan-like ostinato writing. Altogether the piece reflects the decisive impression made on him by hearing Javanese and Cambodian musicians at the 1889 Paris Exposition, which he had striven for years to incorporate effectively in music. In its final bars the music begins to dissolve into elaborate filigree.

Just as 'Pagodes' was his first Oriental piece, so 'La soirée dans Grenade' was the first of Debussy's evocations of Spain — that preternatural embodiment of an 'imaginary Andalusia' which would inspire Manuel de Falla, the native Spaniard, to go back to his country and create a true modern Spanish music based on Debussyan

principles. Debussy's personal acquaintance with Spain was virtually non-existent (he had spent a day just over the border at San Sebastian) and it is possible that one model for the piece was Ravel's *Habanera*. Yet he wrote of this piece (to his friend Pierre Louÿs, to whom it was dedicated), 'if this isn't the music they play in Granada, so much the worse for Granada!' — and there is no debate about the absolute authenticity of Debussy's use of Spanish idioms here. Falla himself pronounced it 'characteristically Spanish in every detail'. 'La soirée dans Grenade' is founded on an ostinato that echoes the rhythm of the habanera and is present almost throughout. Beginning and ending in almost complete silence, this dark nocturne of warm summer nights builds powerfully to its climaxes. The melodic material ranges from a doleful Moorish chant with a distinctly oriental character to a stamping, vivacious dance-measure, taking in brief suggestions of guitar strumming and perfumed Impressionist haze. There is even a hint of castanets near the end. The piece fades out in a coda that seems to distil all the melancholy of the Moorish theme and a last few distant chords of the guitar.

'Jardins sous la pluie' is based on the children's song 'Nous n'rons plus au bois' (We shan't go to

the woods): its original 1894 form was in fact entitled *Quelques aspects de "Nous n'rons plus au bois"*. The two versions are really two distinct treatments of the same set of ideas, but in 'Jardins sous la pluie' Estampes the earlier piece has been entirely rethought. The whole conception is more impressionistic, and subtilized. The teeming semiquaver motion is more all-pervasive, the tunes (for Debussy has added a second children's song for treatment, "Do, do, l'enfant do") more elusive and tinged sometimes with melancholy or nostalgia. The ending of the piece is entirely new. What it loses, perhaps, in child-like brashness the music gains in poetry and technical focus.

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LLŶR WILLIAMS

The Welsh pianist, Llŷr Williams, brings a profound musical intelligence to his work as soloist, accompanist and chamber musician. He has performed with orchestras around the world, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales (with whom he successfully toured the USA), London Mozart Players, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Hallé Orchestra, Sinfonia Cymru and the Minnesota Orchestra. He also appears regularly at the BBC Proms in London and has given many remarkable performances at the Edinburgh Festival.

2009 highlights included a very successful debut in Salzburg, performing Schumann's piano concerto with the Mozarteum Orchestra and Ivor Bolton, several concerts at the *Schubertiade* in Perth Concert Hall, a return to Welsh National Orchestra to play Mozart with Carlo Rizzi and Beethoven's Emperor Concerto with the London Philharmonic and Jukka-Pekka Saraste. During 2010 he performed a Beethoven sonata cycle around the UK and gave recitals at the Wigmore Hall, Handelbeurs Concertzaal in Ghent as well as three concerts at the Aschau Festival with violinist Alexander Janiczek.



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The 2008-2009 season saw Williams make his recital debuts at the Lucerne Festival, in the Wigmore Hall's main recital series and at Carnegie Hall. He was one of the official accompanists for the Cardiff Singer of the

World Competition and took part in three Proms concerts: a performance of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, a solo lunchtime recital and a chamber music concert celebrating 10 years of the BBC's New Generation Artists. He also toured in Europe with Mitsuko Uchida, Christian Poltéra, Soovin Kim and Martin Fröst, as part of the *Borletti-Buitoni Trust's* celebration of its fifth anniversary, with venues including the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. In February, 2009 he gave a series of four concerts for BBC Radio 3 in Cardiff, to celebrate the opening of Hoddinott Hall: two solo recitals, one concert with the Leopold String Trio, and one with bass Shen Yang. In March, Williams made a welcome return to I Pomeriggi Musicali in Milan to work with Antonello Manacorda and Alexander Janiczek, performing Berg's Chamber Concerto and Mendelssohn's Double Concerto. The collaboration with violinist, Alexander Janiczek then continued as they resumed their successful

Beethoven series at Perth Concert Hall with four concerts. He ended the 2009-2010 season with the performance of Beethoven's third Piano Concerto at the Concertgebouw with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

Llŷr Williams is also the subject of two films produced by Opus TF for S4C, the first of which won a Welsh BAFTA for Best Music Programme. The second, broadcast in August 2009, followed his debut at Carnegie Hall.

Born in 1976 in Pentrebychan, North Wales, Llŷr Williams read music at The Queen's College, Oxford and went on to take up a postgraduate scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music where he won every available prize and award. From 2000-02 he was a 'Shinn' Fellow at the Academy, coaching singers and studying conducting.

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